GOD'S PURPOSE IN SUFFERING

Pursuing the Ultimate Reward

BILL RUDGE

GOD'S PURPOSE IN SUFFERING

Pursuing the Ultimate Reward

GOD'S PURPOSE IN
SUFFERING

Pursuing the Ultimate Reward

BILL RUDGE

With special chapters by Maryln Best, Martin and Deidre Bobgan, Elonna McKibben, BJ Rudge, Karen Rudge and Jim Weikal

Hermitage, Pennsylvania

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 or 2020 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (Emphasis added to Scriptures are by the author.)

Scripture quotations marked LSB are from the Legacy Standard Bible, Copyright © 2021 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Managed in partnership with Three Sixteen Publishing Inc.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are from the New King James Version of the Bible, copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

God's Purpose in Suffering — Pursuing the Ultimate Reward

Copyright © 2024 by Bill Rudge Published by Living Truth Publishers A Division of Bill Rudge Ministries, Inc. Hermitage, Pennsylvania www.billrudge.org

ISBN 978-1-889809-25-0

Typesetting by Pine Hill Graphics Cover Design by Alpha Advertising

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the author or publisher, except as provided by USA copyright law.

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Hope When Life Is Falling Apart

The “Whys” of Adversity

Trials with a Purpose

Why Do Bad Things Happen?

Making Sense of Violence and Tragedy

A Cocoon Is Not a Prison

Will it Happen in America?

In the Face of Persecution

How Shall We Respond?

My Attitude in Hard Times

A Call to Crucifixion

Want a Hardship-Free Life?

Many Truths Learned Through Acute Pain

Finding Hope in Tragedy

Why Me? vs. Why NOT Me?

Peace in Times of Uncertainty

Loving Your Enemies in Persecution

How Will It All Work Out?

Scripture Search

Hope When Life Is Falling Apart

Is your life filled with pain and suffering? Do day-to-day struggles and pressures overwhelm you? Are obstacles, opposition and conflicts—the constant bombardment of never-ending problems—wearing you out? Do you sometimes feel hopeless, as though your life is falling apart, with no apparent solution, no purpose or end in sight? Well, you are not alone. Everyone faces unprecedented challenges and difficulties in some capacity. Loss of loved ones, marriages on the brink of dissolution, family conflicts, wayward children, chaotic lives, work-related problems, opposition, hostility, persecution, economic distress, financial pressures, caring for a family member, health challenges, inflammation and pain in the body, struggles with addictions, emotional stress, panic attacks and loneliness are just some of the issues facing people today.

Many believers in Christ are being tested to the core of their being by circumstances over which they have little or no control. Hurting and distressed, many Christians feel abandoned and defeated.

Some Questions

As a Christian and a minister, I have some questions:

- Why all of this pain and suffering?
- Who or what is causing it?
- What is the purpose of it?

- When will it end?
- How will it all work out?
- Is there any hope?
- Is God trying to get my attention?
- Is He allowing or using these circumstances to teach me something?
- What does God want me to learn through this experience?
- Is God using it to mold my life and refine me, like gold through the fire, for a greater purpose that I do not understand now?

I have spent hundreds of hours in Scripture study, prayer and fasting seeking God's perspective on pain and suffering. When the "heat" is on, it is time to do some intense heart searching and evaluation to discover what lessons and insights I can learn. I seek to gain experience and life lessons from every obstacle and adversity I face.

Scripture Teaches

Let's get a biblical perspective on pain and suffering. First, we need to realize that the Lord has not forsaken us. Scripture clearly teaches that adversity, suffering and hardships will occur in a believer's life. Each bout with pain and suffering is either pushing you away or drawing you closer to the Lord. God is working behind the scenes, as well as in and through each of us, to accomplish a purpose beyond our comprehension and immediate circumstances.

Believers in Christ will experience trouble and suffering since we live in a fallen world that is hostile toward God. Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience in the Garden of Eden not only ended their personal relationship with the Creator, but also cursed the human race with pain, suffering and death. As a teen, I tried to deny the Creator so I could live any way I wanted, but I could not deny the existence of suffering and death that Scripture tells us God laid on humankind.

Because no one has been able to defeat death or the negative consequences brought on by violating His commands and principles, I knew His Word was true, and therefore, I knew He was real and could be trusted. If His decree of death has proven true, we can likewise be assured regarding His promise of eternal life.

In This World We Will Have Tribulation

Consider the examples of the heroes of the faith in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), New Testament and throughout history. They have faced much adversity and difficulty.

Abraham was given a promise by the Lord that He would bless him, make him into a great nation and give the Promised Land to his descendants (Genesis 12:1-3, 7), but, soon thereafter, Abraham faced a severe famine in the very land God promised, influencing Abraham to flee to Egypt. There, Pharaoh took Abraham's wife Sarah (through whom God would fulfill His promise for Isaac) thinking she was Abraham's sister (she was his half-sister—Genesis 20:12).

Genesis 12:14-20 gives the following account:

> It came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels. But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go." Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.

God appeared to Abraham's grandson Jacob at Bethel where he

struggled and wrestled with God and was granted a new name, reflecting his change from Jacob ("heel-catcher" or "deceiver") to Israel ("he who struggles with God" or "let God prevail"—Genesis 32:28; 35:10).

Not long after God's promise to Jacob that "the land which I gave to Abraham and Isaac, I will give it to you, and I will give the land to your descendants after you" (Genesis 35:12), Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died near Bethlehem while giving birth to her second child Benjamin (Genesis 35:16-20).

These are only a few examples of Abraham and Jacob's tribulations, but Moses, David, Jeremiah, Jesus' disciples and many others throughout Scripture faced deep trials and great difficulties as well. David said in Psalm 34:19: "Many are the afflictions [pain, distress, grief or misery] of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all [divine protection and preservation]."

David was hiding in a cave facing difficult circumstances when he wrote Psalm 34. King Saul was pursuing him to take his life and David had just escaped from the Philistines. Nevertheless, he trusted that the Lord would protect and rescue him. Those who feel crushed by life's circumstances can take hope in the Lord that their afflictions will not last forever.

Jesus said that in this world we will have tribulation: "These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation [trouble, pressure, affliction, difficulty], but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Because of what Scripture teaches, I accept the fact that I will face challenges, opposition, difficulties and persecution.

Don't You Love Me?

I have often asked God, "Why do You make it so hard on those who love You the most?" The Lord reminds me that those He loves the most are the ones He trains the hardest. God loves you! You are His child, and He wants you to be the best you can be—"to reach your

maximum potential in Christ," so to speak. Once you really believe this, you can trust Him and have peace no matter what your circumstances. If you are yielded to Him, He truly is allowing things in your life, ultimately for your good.

The Israelites actually thought the Lord hated them and brought them out of Egypt to deliver them into the hands of the Amorites to destroy them (Deuteronomy 1:27). That accusation could not have been further from the truth. Later they would learn that, although their wilderness wandering was a consequence of their sin, the Lord was with them and carried them as a father carries a son (Deuteronomy 1:31). He watched over them in the vast wilderness, seeing that they lacked nothing (Deuteronomy 2:7): neither clothes nor sandals wore out, nor did their feet swell (Deuteronomy 8:4; 29:5; Nehemiah 9:21). God provided them manna from heaven (Exodus 16:35; Deuteronomy 8:16; Psalm 78:24; John 6:31). He disciplined them because He loved them (Hebrews 12:5-11).

After Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus, being three days without sight and without eating or drinking, Jesus said to Ananias, "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:16). A reading of Paul's epistles tells of the tremendous suffering and countless obstacles and difficulties this chosen servant of the Lord endured. Paul faced great troubles, hardships, distress, beatings, imprisonments, riots, stoning, hard work, sleepless nights and hunger (2 Corinthians 6:4-5).

The following scriptures give a glimpse:

> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body (2 Corinthians 4:8-10).
>
> Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, patience, love, perseverance, persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured, and out of them all

> the Lord rescued me! Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:10-12).
>
> By glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things (2 Corinthians 6:8-10).
>
> ...in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? (2 Corinthians 11:23-29).

Arm Yourselves

A prominent pastor came into my office distressed and ready to leave the church and ministry altogether because he was facing difficulties and opposition. I commented, "If the apostle Paul said that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, how much more will we as Christian leaders face?" The apostle Peter said that "since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose" (1 Peter 4:1).

Occasionally, a group comes to the obstacle course at our

ministry center and finds it more difficult than they anticipated. When I hear such comments as, “This is harder than I expected,” I say, “This is an obstacle course; did you think you were coming to a picnic?”

You cannot commit your life to Jesus Christ and legitimately say, “I never anticipated the cost I was going to pay.” Before the creation of the world, it was determined that the sacrificial suffering of God’s Son would be the means to redeem human beings. Jesus tells us as believers to take up our cross and follow Him. In addition, the Bible clearly provides numerous examples of those who experienced difficulties, hardships, opposition, suffering and persecution. Sometimes, those most committed to God suffer the most. For reasons we may not understand, God accomplishes His purpose through faithful believers who are willing to endure suffering and persecution for His name’s sake.

Peter’s comment to “arm yourselves” carries a military connotation since soldiers must arm themselves for battle and face possible injury or death. Likewise, we must determine in our hearts to honor and obey God, just as Christ did, no matter what we may suffer.

The "Whys" of Adversity

When facing difficulties and hardships, I become introspective and examine my life as I seek to discover: Did I bring this on myself by making poor choices? Is this just the result of natural consequences? Is God allowing these circumstances because of disobedience or willful sin? Is the enemy causing this and I am in the midst of spiritual warfare? Could God be using these circumstances to refine and purify me?

Bringing Difficulties On Ourselves

We make choices all the time: what we eat, where we go and what we do. Sometimes we suffer the consequences of those choices.

At our obstacle course, I point to a high roof as I tell the young people that while they have a choice to climb it and jump off, once they jump, they no longer have a choice. Likewise, there are two trails they will encounter on the course. "The path on the left," I explain, "will lead you to the next station while the one on the right will cause you to end up where you won't want to be—a dead end. So, choose the correct path to follow. Likewise, you have the freedom to choose whether to do drugs, consume alcohol or engage in premarital sex, but realize that you will not be free from the consequences."

Galatians 6:7 says, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."

During the writing of this book, a man in his seventies came in for prayer prior to his doctor's appointment. Because of a lump and

pain in his throat, he was unable to talk. He whispered, "I made the choice to start smoking as a teenager and did not permanently quit until four months ago. So, I brought it on myself."

If parents refuse to discipline their children or allow inappropriate television, music or behavior in their homes because they are too fearful or lack the energy for confrontation with their children that might occur, one day they will face the whirlwind.

Difficulties Brought on by Others

Sometimes, we face adverse circumstances because someone else made bad choices that affected us. At age 5, I was the victim of someone who accidentally burnt my eye with ashes from his cigarette. I spent a week in the hospital after eye surgery and could have lost vision in my left eye.

For the past several years, I have called Dorothy and Tom on July 5 (the day my seven-year-old brother was hit and killed by a speeding car in 1963) to pray for them. On July 5, 2018, their daughter Nicole was taking her two young daughters to go swimming at her parents' house. On the way, a drunk driver hit Nicole's car. She was killed and her two daughters were severely injured.

Natural Consequences

If my tire goes flat on the way to a speaking engagement, perhaps it was because the tires were worn down or an unseen nail was on the road. Maybe a vehicle accident was due to the unexpected glare of the sun while coming around a bend. Quite possibly the knee injury occurred from slipping on a muddy narrow path to a remote village.

If I get too close to the edge of a cliff, I am going to fall off. Satan did not push me over and God is not punishing me. I suffered the consequence of falling because I am not exempt from the natural law of gravity. Case in point: a teenager, who often worked out at the same time I did in the weight room at the Buhl Club, was

training for the Olympics in power lifting. One night, after drinking too much alcohol with some friends, he got too close to the edge of a dangerous ledge and fell to his death.

Sometimes, it is just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people.

Is There Sin in My Life?

Oftentimes, when adverse circumstances rise up and I am going through the "flames" of life, I get on my knees and ask, "Lord, is there sin in my life? Am I reaping the consequences of an attitude or choice I made in disobedience to Your Word and Spirit? If so, I repent."

I also ponder, "Is there an attitude or behavior I am tolerating or something I am doing or saying that dishonors You? Am I tolerating something in my life or ministry that dishonors You?"

A woman was entangled in an affair with a married man. She phoned me, broken, miserable and weeping. She knew her miserable conditions were the result of violating the clear commands in God's Word. Once she repented, her life and circumstances greatly improved, although some of the pain and suffering she unleashed continued.

A pastor's daughter lost her marriage, children and home because she turned to alcohol, drugs and affairs. In hopelessness and helplessness, she returned to the Lord. Her life became much better, but the "scars" from her foolish choices remain.

A man I knew struggled with pornography and extramarital affairs. His outspoken testimony for Christ was marred by a hypocritical lifestyle. Eventually, when his physical body became ravaged and his youthful appearance vanished, he truly repented and his behavior became consistent with his profession of faith. The desires and pleasures of this world disappear in the presence of disease, disability, disaster or death. Even if you are not dying or facing a dreadful disease or crippling injury, perhaps you are going through a season of refinement to make you stronger.

It is usually easy to tell when a person has gone through the "fire." Attitudes of arrogance, materialism and immoral behavior are absent from their lives, replaced with a passion for the Lord and an increased effectiveness in ministry. Our light shines the brightest in the dark.

The apostle Peter tells us that "the one who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human lusts, but for the will of God" (1 Peter 4:1-2).

The psalmist said:

> Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep Your word. It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes [law or live by Your principles] (Psalm 119:67, 71).

God can restore us, and turn our circumstances around for good if we truly repent. So, while suffering "scars" from the sin and rebellion in my past, I consider what I can do to reverse them—if possible. We might have to live with our "scars," but God can lessen our 'regrets' through repentance.

Spiritual Warfare

Am I in the throes of spiritual warfare? Has the enemy targeted me and designed a scenario to discourage and defeat me and thwart God's plan for my life?

There is a real enemy who seeks to discourage, distract, distress, defeat and destroy every person committed to Jesus Christ. He wants to devastate your faith, divide your family and damage your testimony.

When you face spiritual warfare, it can become intense. Bizarre things can happen with little or no explanation as the enemy raises up people to oppose you and creates circumstances to cause chaos in your life and family. At these times, we must know the authority we have as believers in Jesus Christ, how to use the armor of God

and the sword of the Spirit—which is the Word of God. I seek the Lord through fasting and prayer as I entreat (ask earnestly) His help.

Refining and Molding

Scripture is clear: God purifies and prepares His people. Anyone used by God will go through wilderness experiences that train us to stand through life's challenges and temptations. Just as a soldier is prepared for battle, believers are trained through difficulties to face any circumstance. God allows pain and suffering to refine and purify us like gold, passed through the fire, for a greater purpose than what we may understand at the time.

God is doing a work today in the lives of His people. I am convinced that the end-times church is going to parallel the early church which suffered much persecution. We, too, will suffer much persecution. The early church was focused on the teachings of Christ, the Word of God, prayer and fellowship. In the last days, the true church will also have this same focus.

God is doing a refining work in the body of Christ—those who love Him and have genuinely committed their hearts to Him. He is cleansing us from the lusts of the flesh and sins of the world. He is allowing pain and suffering to get our attention, to purify our lives and replace the cravings of this world, to refocus our attention back onto Him and His Word.

You and I may face some of the greatest spiritual warfare, obstacles, difficulties and trials that the body of Christ has ever seen. God is preparing committed believers to stand strong and not forsake or deny His name—even unto death. So, keep this in mind when you encounter these things, that God is either the One doing a work in you, or He is allowing it for a purpose not yet fully understood.

Is God allowing or using my adverse circumstance for a greater good, a higher purpose or a stronger testimony than I can now see or comprehend?

Romans 8:28 states:

> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Sometimes, when I am speaking, I pass out puzzle pieces with Romans 8:28 written on them, explaining that, while we only see a small piece of the larger picture, God sees the entire completed puzzle. Likewise, we have only the snapshot of our current circumstances, but God has the movie of our entire life and knows how everything turns out. While it may be a puzzling paradox to us, our responsibility is to trust Him to fit all the puzzle pieces of our lives together for His glory and our good. Also, if we were to hold that puzzle piece too close to our eye, it blots out everything else in view; we would not be able to see the verse written on it and will lose our focus on God. However, if we keep that piece of puzzle in a proper perspective, we can see Romans 8:28 written on it and far beyond to the landscape all around us. Then, that small puzzle piece will not seem so big and overwhelming in comparison to God's tapestry of us for eternity. It is far better to trust God and His promise.

I also tell an audience that, even if they could get the puzzle pieces from everyone in attendance and put them all together, they still would not have God's full picture, because God has an infinite number of puzzles, all of which He is assembling at the same time into incredible designs. God's ways are beyond our comprehension. It is best just to trust Him!

I have walked with the Lord for more than 50 years, and I can honestly testify to the truth of this scriptural promise in Romans 8:28. God is faithful. I have discovered the truth that, in God's time and in God's way, all things really do work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.

Discerning the Difference

There are times when we must take authority *now* in the name and power of Jesus Christ, and expect an immediate healing or victory.

There are times we must repent and make changes in our lives. There are times we must persevere in prayer and stand strong and endure in unwavering faith until God brings the victory in His time and in His way. There are times we must submit and accept our circumstances as the will of God by not contending with Him, but trusting that in all our circumstances, His grace is sufficient. What we *need* is the wisdom and discernment to know the difference, which comes from spending time in God's Word and in prayer!

Trials with a Purpose

This chapter is excerpted from an article by Martin and Deidre Bobgan, longtime friends and supporters of the Bill Rudge Ministries. It provides practical and helpful information.

The world sees problems as impediments to accomplishments, progress and happiness. The idea is to get through problems and solve them as soon as possible so that one can get on with life. The Bible presents an entirely different perspective on problems of living and even on the most horrendous trials.

The Bible begins with God's perfect creation of all that exists, including humans created in the image of God, and then reveals the disastrous source of all problems: rebellion against God, first by Satan and his minions, next by Adam and Eve and then followed by their sin-infested progeny, generation after generation.

Problems of living, therefore, are not isolated human events of grief and disaster, but part of the spiritual battle that has been raging throughout the ages.

Many purposes are fulfilled through trials that work for the good of believers. In themselves, however, trials are not necessarily beneficial. It is what God works in the believer through the trials and it is also how the believer responds to God in the midst of those trials. The same trial may afflict two people differently, with one turning to God in faith, and the other one blaming other people, circumstances and even God Himself.

God uses problems to expose sin for the purpose of repentance, forgiveness, change and spiritual growth. God also uses suffering to

refine His children into "pure gold" and to glorify Himself. He will use suffering to correct and discipline. Yet, not all suffering is the result of a person's own sin. The apostle Paul suffered greatly because of his faithfulness to preach the gospel. Nevertheless, whatever the source of suffering, all can be used to show forth God's glory as believers choose to depend on Him and to follow Him in all circumstances.

Christ-centered ministry sees problems as opportunities to know Christ more fully, love Him more deeply and follow Him more completely.

The book of Job reveals God's purposes in human trials that show forth His glory and wisdom and demonstrates the power of faith in God. After the devastating loss of his children and all his possessions, Job's response was "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). Job's faith was being tested to its fullest as Satan afflicted him with painful boils all over his body; yet, Job kept his faith, proved Satan wrong, won the spiritual battle and received great rewards at the end.

It is when our faith is tested that we find God's faithfulness to His Word. The truth of the gospel we believe is confirmed over and over again in the trenches of daily life. Each test of faith can drive a believer deeper into the Lord as the shield of faith fends off the fiery darts of doubt and condemnation.

In our culture of instant this and one-minute that, waiting on God in the midst of trials both tests and strengthens patience. Suffering brings us into close intimacy with God wherein we taste of Christ's suffering and also of His great consolation as He comforts us. Thus we are enabled to console others with the consolation we have received from God (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

Trials test the faith and reveal whether or not it is genuine. They also reveal areas of unbelief. If we resist trials, and murmur and complain, we will not benefit from them. If we turn to God in faith, trusting that He will use them for our spiritual growth, then we will benefit far more than we realize at the time.

Trials are not joyous in themselves, but difficult and often painful and even long-lasting. The joy comes from the prospect of God working His perfect will in His children through the trials. It is the kind of joy that Jesus knew during the greatest suffering of all; for it was "the joy that was set before him" (Hebrews 12:2). The joy was in the anticipation of completing the requirements for our salvation, the anticipation of much fruitfulness.

For believers, the joy comes through faith in God's promises, that He will accomplish good and that these trials work an "eternal weight of glory," as Paul declared:

> For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Remember that what Paul calls his "light affliction" included all of the afflictions, persecutions, great physical pain and much overall suffering that he lists in the eleventh chapter of 2 Corinthians.

Paul knew that his calling as a Christian was to endure suffering for the sake of the gospel. As days darken in our circumstances, we need to follow Paul's example of knowing our calling as believers and to use all circumstances for the sake of the gospel, the glory of God and our own growth to maturity in Christ.

Why Do Bad Things Happen?

In this section, Dr. BJ Rudge asks and answers a profound question that all of us ask.

My 11-year-old daughter asked me a question that I am sure all of us have asked at some point in our lives, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to us?" In thinking of how best to answer this question and make sense to an 11-year-old, I recalled the story of the "Wolfpack" kids.

These kids were members of the Angulo family. They lived in a small apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The six sons and one daughter were homeschooled by their mother, Susanne, and, except on rare occasions, they were not allowed to leave their apartment. Their father, Oscar, was a Peruvian immigrant and felt New York would "contaminate" his children. In order to protect them from the dangers outside their apartment, he not only kept the door locked, but he possessed the only key to unlock it. In this environment, the father had complete control over their lives, and, as the mother stated in an interview, "I felt like I didn't have control over my choices." Their father may have created an environment to protect them from danger, but, in the process, he deprived them of their freedom.

While God is sovereign, He permits human freedom. Thus, He did not create us like puppets, controlling our every move and decision. Nor did he place us in an environment where, like a tyrannical dictator, we were compelled to honor Him. Instead, as we see in the Garden of Eden, He created mankind with the freedom to choose

whether to obey or disobey Him (Genesis 3). However, with the potential for choice came the consequences of choice. As we find in Genesis, Adam and Eve chose to disobey and with their choice (sin) came the consequences: pain, suffering and death (Romans 5:12; 6:23).

Adam and Eve

At this point, you may be asking the same question my daughter did, "How is it fair for us to be punished for the sins of Adam and Eve?" While it is true that we are all subject to the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin through birth, we are all still as guilty as they are, for each of us has also used our freedom to disobey God's commands (Romans 3:23). In other words, each of us is accountable for our own sin (1 John 1:8). Yet, despite our consistent abuse of the freedom God has given us, He still chooses to be a Father that extends mercy and grace to those who ask for it (John 3:16-17; Romans 6:23).

Why Does God Allow Bad Things to Happen?

The first time I asked this question was because of a family which was very close to mine. Their daughter at the age of 13 was diagnosed with cancer. Within a year of her diagnosis, she passed away. I found myself asking that very question, "Why?"

If it is true that God is all knowing, then certainly He knows how to prevent this girl from getting cancer. If it is also true that God is all powerful, then, He should be able to prevent her from getting cancer. And if it is true that God is all loving, then, He would want to prevent her from getting cancer and dying. Yet, this young girl, in the prime of her life, died. Why?

A neighbor wanted to know why her husband of 45 years had to die of cancer, and a friend wanted to know why his wife no longer loved him and was leaving him for another man. This same question probably pervades the thinking of every person who has been affected by a natural disaster, such as Hurricane Sandy.

With a heavy heart, I watched the news and witnessed the devastation left by Hurricane Sandy several years ago. I was grateful that the damage in our area was not as bad as anticipated, but it was hard to see the many people who lost their homes and businesses. A friend of mine called to ask for prayer as their house suffered significant water damage from the storm.

Seeing the images of flooded neighborhoods, burning houses and people without electricity, a particular story stuck in my mind: during the storm, two young boys were killed when a large tree fell into their living room. I instantly thought of my own son and wondered how these families would cope with the loss of their sons.

I wondered why these boys had to die this way. My feelings at that moment were the same as when I woke up on the morning of July 20, 2012. After going through my morning routine and following breakfast, I turned on the television to check the weather for the day; only then did I learn of the tragic shooting in a Colorado movie theatre. I am sure many of you had the same initial reaction I did, "How could someone do this?" This question (repeatedly asked through every tragedy) leads to other questions, which ultimately leads us to ask: "Why does God allow bad things to happen?"

It is not always possible to give a satisfactory answer for the "why" question, but I can point them to the WHO! By pointing them to Jesus Christ, I know from personal experience that, even in the uncertainty of pain and suffering, we have hope. Several years ago, my family faced the painful ordeal of a miscarriage. As I walked with my wife and children through this, the only thing we could hold onto was the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

I shared this hope with a friend of mine who was dying of cancer. When he was healthy, he and his wife did a lot of traveling. I asked him where his favorite place was, and he began to tell me all about Aruba and how beautiful it was—how nice the people were. As he described the beauty of Aruba, it was like he was back there sitting on the beach watching the waves.

A few days later, in the hospital, I reminded him of our

conversation about Aruba, which instantly brought a smile to his face. I began to share with him about a place God had prepared for him that was so much greater than Aruba. I told him about how much God loved him and how He demonstrated this love by sacrificing His life so that he can go to this place for eternity.

The Heart of Christianity

Like my 11-year-old daughter and myself, we may not fully understand in this life why bad things and tragedies happen or why God did not prevent the tree from falling on the house that killed those two young boys. Yet, we can be assured of the depth of His love for us. We can be certain that, in the midst of life's difficulties, He is with us—a God who responded to evil, pain and suffering by sending His only Son to die on a cross, offering us the opportunity to live in eternity with Him. We can know the love of a Father who desires to provide His children not only true freedom, but also eternal blessings. This is the heart of Christianity, and it's the best explanation of hope to a world full of pain and suffering.

> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:1-4).

God's Purpose in Suffering

Suffering and perseverance lead to spiritual strength:

> Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter

> various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).
>
> Peter encouraged suffering Christians with the promise that:
>
> After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you (1 Peter 5:10).

Persecution, trials and tribulations are often the fire God uses to purify a believer's life and refine and strengthen his faith. Justice on behalf of those who suffer persecution and martyrdom for Jesus Christ will eventually triumph.

As Christians experience persecution in a world which is growing more and more hostile to the true gospel of Jesus Christ, it is reasonable to wonder why God does not instantly judge those causing the persecution. On the surface, it seems that not only are these persecutors not being judged, but they are actually prospering. You may have asked yourself, "Why do the wicked appear to prosper while the righteous suffer?" Jeremiah raised this issue in his prayer to God:

> Righteous are You, O LORD, that I would plead my case with You; indeed I would discuss matters of justice with You: Why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease? (Jeremiah 12:1).

At the heart of this issue is a sense of justice. In fact, this is the cry of the martyrs in the book of Revelation:

> How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (Revelation 6:10).

These martyrs cry out to God for justice to prevail and for the wicked to be judged according to their deeds. God assures these

martyrs that justice will ultimately prevail as He tells them to wait a little longer until the number of those martyred for their faith is complete (Revelation 6:11).

God's words are true, and justice will prevail in the end. God not only judges Babylon for killing His saints and being drunk on their blood (Revelation 17:6), He also judges all of the dead and the living according to their deeds done on earth (Revelation 20:11-15). The persecutors of Christians in the past and the persecutors of Christians today will have their "day in court" with God Almighty.

The suffering in this world does not compare to the glory that awaits the believer. The present realities in a believer's life of pain, suffering and death can easily bring about discouragement. In the face of these real-life experiences, Scripture predicts a blessed and glorious future for believers in Jesus Christ (Revelation 21:1-4). This is the blessed hope that awaits true believers in Jesus Christ. Although we will face difficulties and tragedies in this life, these in no way compare to the glory that is to be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

The Bible points believers away from our present trials and directs us toward our only hope. It encourages us to persevere in faith by assuring us that, through Christ, we win in the end. A soldier is much more determined to continue to fight if he or she believes his side will eventually win. He or she realizes that, whatever the pain involved, the ultimate victory is worth any sacrifice. So, too, believers can be faithful unto death because we know that those who put their faith in Jesus Christ will triumph in the grand finale.

Reflecting on God's Faithfulness

The children of Israel in the Old Testament are a great example of why we should reflect upon God's faithfulness in the past. Whenever they faced a challenge, they were reminded to go back and reflect on God who had proven in the past to be greater than any situation they presently faced (Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:18; 15:15; Joshua 4:19-24; 24:6-13). In fact, this is the reason why the Israelites were to

observe the Passover, which was to be a reminder of how God delivered them out of Egyptian bondage (Exodus 12:14-17).

I utilize a prayer journal to help me remember God's faithfulness. All of us know how easy it is to forget things, so I write them down in my journal. It is encouraging to reflect on past requests and to see how God has responded. Sometimes, God did not answer in the way I thought He would, nor in the time frame I wanted, but in each case I am reminded that I serve a God who listens and responds to the needs of His children (Psalm 34:17; Matthew 7:7; John 14:13-14; Hebrews 4:16; 1 John 5:14-15).

I cannot tell you how many times I have gone back to my prayer journal and been amazed at how God has worked in my life. When my family faces great challenges, my prayer journal helps me during those times as I reflect upon how God brought us through other challenges. We serve a faithful God (Psalm 36:5; 89:1; Lamentations 3:22-23; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:3).

Making Sense of Violence and Tragedy

BJ provides additional insight on violence and tragedy.

My wife and I always drove our first and third grade daughters to school. However, it felt different after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting that killed innocent children and teachers. Those images filled my mind. Who could imagine a person doing that?

I will never know how much a seven and nine-year-old could comprehend of the events which happened that day, but it did leave my daughters with a certain amount of insecurity and anxiety. This was especially noticeable when my seven-year-old, who for the first time all year, cried about not wanting to go to school.

How could a place that once represented learning, having fun with friends, getting the High Five award for good behavior and sharing snacks at lunch, become a place of fear for my daughter? As we turned into the parking lot of the school, the familiar image of kids getting out of their cars and walking into the school with their backpacks and lunch boxes was overshadowed by the presence of three police cars, a stark reminder of how an act of evil has forced everyone to ask the question, "How safe are my children at school?"

How can we make sense of the numerous tragedies that have happened on school campuses and other venues across the nation? How do we make sense of all the tragedies that are going on throughout the world?

On a human level, we will never be able to fully understand WHY these tragedies occur. The ultimate solution to these tragedies will never be found if we fail to consider God's perspective. We need to remember that God has not left us in the dark as to what is going on. In fact, as the following four fundamental truths will show, an examination of God's Word can help shed light on these horrible tragedies.

First, we need to recognize that we are in a spiritual battle (Ephesians 6:12). Since the Fall of mankind back in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), the world finds itself in a battle between good and evil. At that moment, Satan was given limited authority by God over this world. As the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), Satan seeks to destroy mankind because, just as he hates God, he also hates humans who were created in God's image. It is no wonder why he is described in the Bible as the adversary/enemy (1 Peter 5:8), the evil one (1 John 5:19), a murderer (John 8:44), the father of lies (John 8:44), a roaring lion seeking who he may devour (1 Peter 5:8) and the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10). Thus, as a murderer and father of lies, Satan has used his delegated authority to pour out all forms of EVIL in this world. In fact, God warns us that before He returns, Satan's wrath on this world will only increase:

> Woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, knowing that he has only a short time (Revelation 12:12).

The day is coming when God will judge Satan, and Jesus Christ will rule as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Second, we need to recognize that an increase in violence is a sign we are living in the end times. Jesus said that, before He returns, it would be like the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37). What were the days of Noah like? It was a time of wickedness and violence:

> Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. God looked on the earth,

> and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. Then God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth" (Genesis 6:11-13).

Just go back and read the news headlines mentioned previously as well as the current headlines, and it is not hard to see how Paul's warning of "difficult times" strikingly describes the day and age in which we live (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Through these multitudes of tragic events, we can hear God warning the world that His return is drawing near when He will come to judge the living and the dead. We know why He continues to delay this return: His desire to see all people come to salvation.

> Where is the promise of His coming?… The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:4, 9).

Third, we need to recognize that God will execute justice. Our world is not only marred by violence but also by injustice. We see so many acts of wickedness go unpunished that we begin to wonder, like Asaph, why the wicked seem to prosper (Psalm 73). However, just as this psalm concludes, God will enact His judgment upon every act of wickedness (Proverbs 11:21).

Since God is a holy and righteous Being, He will not allow any evil to go unpunished. In fact, we will all be held accountable for everything we do (Ecclesiastes 3:17; 12:14). Even though God is gracious and forgiving, let us "not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a person sows, this he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). Those who continue to sow evil and wickedness in this life, will reap eternal punishment and separation from God. This is why God warns in Revelation 21:8 that murderers will have their part in the lake which burns with fire.

Fourth, we need to recognize that God has conquered evil, and, because of this, we can have HOPE. Over two thousand years ago,

God responded to the cries of those who would suffer any tragedy or be victimized by wickedness. Jesus' birth, life and death would be the means by which evil would finally be conquered.

Yes, God has responded not only to the evil that occurred at Sandy Hook, but to every act of evil, pain and suffering that happens in this life. Because of the mercy and love He showed on the cross, we can ALL one day experience eternal life with Him because He promises to wipe away every tear from our eyes and remove death, sorrow, crying and pain forever (Revelation 21:4).

Just ask Jesus to forgive your sins, believe and receive His free gift of salvation.

A Cocoon Is Not a Prison

Maryln Best, a staff editor and biblical researcher for Bill Rudge Ministries, wrote this perceptive section before she went to be with the Lord.

Are you presently in the midst of a situation which seems to be hopeless and unresolvable? Have answers to urgent prayer not come? Ongoing problems can, at times, bring almost suffocating pressure from the stress. The problem may be a spouse who stubbornly refuses to follow biblical marriage guidelines; unrepentant family members; rebellious children; financial difficulties; conflicts at work or with neighbors and friends; church disagreements; debilitating illness, either personally or within the family; caretaking of the elderly, etc.

Perhaps, by considering changes which take place in nature and applying the principles to your present trial, you will be encouraged. Metamorphism is the change in the mineralogical, structural or textural composition of rocks under heat or pressure which, for example, turns limestone into marble.

Metamorphosis is a change of form, shape, structure or substance: a transformation undergone during development. Larva is the immature form of any animal that changes structurally when it becomes an adult through a complex metamorphosis. The caterpillar is the larva of the butterfly, which appears only after there has been a marked and complete change within a cocoon.

The pressure of the cocoon is only for a limited period of time. It is not a prison! There is a set time for it to be opened (by the

struggle of its contents), and then the beauty of what comes forth will be evident to all. The strength in the wings of a butterfly comes from the great amount of struggling that must be done. People who have attempted to slit the sides of a cocoon, hoping to ease the effort, report that the butterfly died because the wings were weakened from not being allowed to make a strenuous exertion, thereby becoming strong.

Pressure molds us into what God wants us to be. So, when you earnestly cry out for Him to change things, perhaps it is you who needs to be changed by a difficult period of time to refine away impurities. You won't fully know His power until you are in the midst of the fiery furnace which requires deliverance. Only then can you trust Him to bring you out, and even your enemies will see His grace upon you.

In Bill Rudge's book, *Overcoming the Giants in Your Life*, he states: "I wanted to escape. But you cannot see the impossible unless you are in an impossible situation. Be faithful to God, and if, in so doing, you end up surrounded by adverse circumstances, be at peace and know that He is in control. Trust the Lord to deliver you." Bill also declares, "God often does not change our circumstances until he changes our heart, and we learn to live victoriously while in the difficulty."

During trials and tribulation, consider what the apostle Peter triumphantly exclaimed in 1 Peter 1:6-9:

> In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

So, beloved, let us encourage ourselves in the Lord as we wait for solutions and answers. Philippians 3:10 tells us that knowing Christ not only means experiencing the power of the risen Lord, but also means sharing in the fellowship of His sufferings. We are all in this together as His body. Our eternal rewards are ahead—we are just passing through. Our trials will not last forever.

May God be glorified when you personally discover that a cocoon is not a prison.

Will it Happen in America?

In this brief chapter, Karen Rudge asks a crucial question that we all must solemnly consider.

In America, right now, we still have the freedom to worship as we please, carry a Bible and attend church. But, I wonder how long this will last?

While many Christians across the world are not free to read the Bible, pray, worship or witness, too many in America have become complacent thinking persecution could never happen here. However, as Bill clearly recognized back in the 1980s, it is coming to America. The winds of persecution are beginning to blow across the U.S.

In our churches, many Christians are being entertained or are participating in New Age spirituality, while in other countries committed believers are being persecuted and their churches burned down. Bibles are being burned, shredded or confiscated and Christians are tortured, imprisoned, enslaved and martyred. Unnoticed by many, there is a gradual eroding of religious freedoms in the U.S. and hostility grows toward the sharing of the gospel.

Believers in America not only need to be praying on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world where persecution and suffering are rampant, but preparing for what is headed our way. Bill's new book on the end times will help many prepare for what is ahead prophetically. We also need to pray and work, while we can, to bring the gospel to America and people of all nations, before it is too late.

In this day and age, as opposition increases and many try to

silence God's Word and the testimony of Jesus, we must be unashamed witnesses for Jesus Christ and remain faithful to Him and to His Word until the very end!

In the Face of Persecution

BJ provides additional insight on persecution.

I heard an interesting quote by a Christian who was facing persecution in a communist country: "We would like an easing of our conditions, but not full ceasing of the oppression. We fear that liberty would make us lose the burning love of Christ."

As I contemplated his comment, I wondered if the lack of persecution in America is a reason why many Christians have a shallow commitment to Christ. I also wondered if Christians in America would continue to stand for Christ in the face of persecution. Although I am thankful for the freedom that believers still have in America, I pray that this freedom does not result in believers losing their burning love for Christ. The Bible says that a worldwide persecution of believers will come in the end times. My prayer is, when this persecution comes, all believers will be ready to stand for their faith—even to the point of giving their lives for Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul stated while he was imprisoned in Rome, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21).

Pagans and Christians

We should do more than strive for personal peace. We should seek to be used by God to bring hope to others. I read an article that discussed how previous pandemics in history caused major shifts in the world. Two of these impacted the Roman Empire in the second century and third century A.D. causing a major shift in the Empire's worldview. According to the author, these pandemics had a mortality

rate of about 25-30 percent of the Empire's population. At this time, the Empire was pagan; the majority of people worshipped multiple gods. Christianity was less than 1 percent of the population. The response of the pagans and Christians to these pandemics was starkly different. The pagans opted to live in self-isolation with the goal of self- preservation, while the Christians sought opportunities to minister to the sick and hopeless. This response by the Christians, along with several other factors, affected the Roman Empire so dramatically that the author concludes by saying, "in roughly a span of a century, an essentially pagan Empire found itself well on its way to becoming a majority Christian one." While we need to use wisdom regarding any crisis, let us not waste the opportunity God has provided for us at this time in history. In a world overcome with uncertainty and fear, may we be living testimonies of the peace that comes from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

How Shall We Respond?

The body of Christ is being refined and purified—readied for the coming of our Lord; prepared to be effective witnesses until He comes. We must not grow weary or give up but live by faith and through the strength of His Spirit and Word. We must strive to become disciples who remain faithful in the midst of life's troubles and be victorious against the assaults of the enemy.

Romans 12:1-2 states:

> Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

God does not want you living the rest of your life for the desires of this world. The world tells you to enjoy this life for your self-centered fulfillment. However, God implies that, although He created all this for your enjoyment, there are some parameters—some guidelines for ultimate enjoyment and fulfillment. So, I have to decide: do I go off and fulfill the lusts of the flesh, or do I seek the will of God who will ultimately satisfy me far more than any pleasure this world has to offer?

Suffering that Purifies

Many people who are not close to the Lord get very close to Him

when they are fearful of impending doom or death seems imminent. I have led several atheists and others with little interest in God to genuine faith in Christ on their deathbeds. Dying and distressed people are more receptive to the gospel when faced with the irreversible, inevitable and imminent reality of eternity.

"Lord, I have an important question. Why did You create humans with the potential for such extreme pain and suffering?" Beginning in the late evening hours of November 18, 2020, I had excruciating pain in both hips. I rarely have pain but, occasionally, pain flares up in some part of my body from the agitation of previous injuries and trauma. This pain was so extreme I thought it could put me in heart attack mode. As usual, I prayed and sought the Lord, contemplating what insight I might gain through this ordeal. Then, I realized that, in the midst of extreme pain, all desires for this world dissipate. A person either cries out to God for help, or curses God because of their pain, which usually has little or nothing to do with God, and more to do with the consequences from their previous choices.

There is a clear distinction between those who receive God and love Him and, those who hate Him and reject Him. The temporary pain and suffering of those who repent and receive His grace will result, one day, with all pain and suffering removed for eternity. The pain and suffering of those who hate and reject Christ are but a foreshadow of what lies ahead for those separated from God for all eternity.

When on mission trips, I meet people who are suffering greatly. They love to hear about all of the miracles and victories God has done, but are even more encouraged when, sharing my own life examples, I tell them about the adversity and difficulty and the perseverance required to serve Christ. You see, our life for Jesus Christ shines all the brighter in the darkness of our circumstances. You have an opportunity to let your life shine for Jesus Christ when you are facing much difficulty.

> Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Peter 4:19).

If you are suffering according to the will of God, then be at peace. Submit your life to Him. You can walk in assurance, confidence, courage, strength and determination and have His peace in all your circumstances. There is nothing or no one who can harm or deter God's purpose for your life. The enemy will seek to discourage, frustrate or intimidate you, but you can walk through that with confidence. Whether we live or whether we die, we do it for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Remember your first love: your first love has always been Jesus Christ; your first love has always been His Word and prayer; your first love has always been evangelism, witnessing, reaching others for Christ. I believe God's desire for you is that you return to your first love. Love Jesus Christ with all of your heart—in spite of your circumstances. Desire His Word. Desire to spend time in prayer whether you feel like it or not. Remember, love is more than a feeling and an emotional response. It is an act of your will—choosing a course of action. Return to your first love and be willing to obey—even suffer for Christ—if it will advance the gospel.

My Attitude in Hard Times

My next question is, "What attitude and response does God *not* want me to have in times of pain, suffering and hardship?" When tough times and misfortune arise, many walk away saying, "You have forsaken me; You have abandoned me; You have let me suffer." We all have seasons in our lives that test us, refine us and prepare us to stand strong and be witnesses for Jesus Christ. Let's consider the following account in Exodus to gain some insight on what God expects of us during difficult times.

Is the Lord Among Us or Not?

After leaving Egyptian bondage, the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness according to the command of the Lord, and camped where there was no water for them to drink. They quarreled, grumbled against Moses and tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" (Exodus 17:7).

Have you ever felt like this when going through difficult times? Wondering "is the Lord with me or not?" Maybe you feel like this today.

Let us get some background information on this account in Exodus that precedes them asking, "Is the Lord among us, or not?" The generation of Israelites that Moses led out of Egyptian bondage were grumblers, complainers and quarrelsome. Moses had performed the signs the Lord commanded him to do in the sight of the elders of Israel (Exodus 4:28-30), yet the children of Israel grumbled when Pharaoh made them gather their own straw to make

bricks without reducing the daily quota (Exodus 5:1-22).

The Lord performed many miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt to bring about their deliverance and free them from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 7:1-14:20). The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on their way and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light (Exodus 13:21-22); yet they grumbled at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:11-12). God miraculously parted the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:13-31), but, later, as God led them through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, they grumbled for water (Exodus 15:22-27).

Then, they grumbled for food. "The sons of Israel said to them, 'Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger'" (Exodus 16:3). So, God provided quail and manna—bread from heaven (Exodus 16).

Later on, they grumbled about the manna: "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna" (Numbers 11:5-6). On both occasions, the Lord miraculously supplied.

Now, in Exodus 17, they grumbled again over water, asking, "Is the LORD among us, or not?" Exodus 17:1-7 details the account:

> Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So

> Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me." Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. He named the place Massah ["Testing"] and Meribah ["Contending"] because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us, or not?"

Appropriate names, "Testing" and "Contending," were assigned to this place; a disappointing culmination to all they had experienced of God's miraculous care and guidance (*MacArthur Study Bible*, note on Exodus 17:7). So grievous was the Israelites' sin that day in the wilderness for testing God and contending with Him, that Psalm 95 and Hebrews 3 mention it as a warning.

Psalm 95:7-11 states:

> Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. For forty years I loathed that generation, and said they are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways. Therefore I swore in My anger, truly they shall not enter into My rest.

The writer of the book of Hebrews repeats this strong warning:

> Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, "They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.' So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not

> enter My rest.'" Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: "Today, if you will hear His voice, Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion." For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:7-19 NKJV). (Also see Hebrews 4.)

Is it any wonder that it was this generation of Israelites who, when they were about to enter the Promised Land, began to grumble when the ten spies gave a bad report in Numbers 13? No wonder the Lord pronounced judgment on them to wander for forty years in the wilderness until that generation, those over age twenty, died.

Senior citizens, don't let the pain in your body or the challenges of growing older make you bitter or unbelieving or cause you to turn from the Lord. Instead, let those difficulties draw you all the closer to Him.

The Right Attitude

We all face challenges. Even more important than our circumstances is the attitude that leads to our response. We cannot always control what happens to us, but we can control how we respond to what happens to us. Since we have dealt with some of the consequences of bad responses, let us consider some good responses in the midst of pain and suffering.

Faith: Face difficulties, hardships and tragedies with faith, not fear; not with an attitude of disbelief ("Is the LORD among us, or not?") but of faith ("I know the Lord is with me and He will either enable me to overcome or give me the strength to go through it!").

We can be like Joshua and Caleb who responded in faith, courage and obedience when they encountered the giants while exploring the Promised Land, rather than the ten spies whose unbelief, fear and disobedience caused the people to murmur, complain and rebel. We can choose to say like Job, "Though He slay me, I will hope in Him" (Job 13:15).

Two days following a tragic accident that killed two teenage girls and left two fighting for their lives, I texted the mother of the girl who was driving the car: "The Lord once spoke to my heart by asking me the following question: 'Are you willing to be humiliated for Me to be glorified?' I replied that I was. So, I ask you, 'Are you willing to face this tragedy for God to be glorified?'" She texted right back, "Yes, we are."

Thankfulness: The apostle Paul was in prison and his detractors were probably saying, "This is the apostle Paul, the one who is writing all of the letters to the churches." They were mocking and undermining him. Paul wrote back and said that his being in prison is turning out to be an advantage for the gospel. So, ask yourself, "Am I willing to be humiliated and suffer for God to be glorified?" Hopefully, we can all say, "Lord, if it requires me to suffer and be humiliated for You to be glorified, then I am willing to do so."

The apostle Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

We do not give thanks for everything, but through everything, realizing God is at work to produce good, even in bad circumstances. Something happens when we thank and praise the Lord: it takes the focus off of us and our problems and focuses on the only One who can really help us. It is also a powerful witness and testimony to a skeptical world concerning our faith in Jesus Christ.

Jay and Kathryn were a wonderful young Christian couple.

Kathryn was a beautiful Christian woman from Chile, and Jay was a talented man living in San Diego who designed the covers for several of my books. I was blessed to perform their wedding on a beach in Southern California. A few years later, while in his thirties, Jay died of cancer leaving Kathryn a widow, and young mother of two toddlers. She told me before I spoke at Jay's funeral that, even in her grief and sadness, she realized how BIG her God is. She praised Him for His blessings in spite of her intense pain.

Kathryn had an amazing attitude of faith and trust in the Lord that transcended her heartache. She triumphed in the midst of her trials and tragedies. Through her tears, she fixed her eyes on Jesus. She looked beyond her current circumstances to what eternity holds for her. She realized that this world is not her home and she is merely passing through, taking as many others as possible with her into God's Kingdom.

Hope and Peace: Isaiah 26:3 (NKJV) promises:

> You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Let's take a closer look at Isaiah 26:3. When you truly trust in the LORD, you will keep your mind stayed (focused) on Him instead of on your problems. And, if you keep your mind and thoughts stayed on Him, He will keep you in perfect peace—a peace that transcends your circumstances and surpasses all comprehension (Philippians 4:7).

The apostle Peter admonishes us to "cast all your anxiety on Him, because He cares about you" (1 Peter 5:7). The storms of life may be raging all around us, but we can have inner peace. When situations or problems arise over which I have no control, I fall on my knees and pray—sometimes repeatedly—then leave them in God's hands.

I have discovered (as listed in my prayer and fasting list) that the Lord truly is my Source and Strength, my Rock and Fortress, my Defender and Deliverer, my Shield and Sword, my Protector and Provider, my Helper and Healer....

"For You are my hope; O Lord God, You are my confidence from my youth" (Psalm 71:5). "How blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God" (Psalm 146:5). "The hope of the righteous is gladness, but the expectation of the wicked perishes" (Proverbs 10:28).

Trust: What do we need more than anything else when facing adversity or tragedy? We need assurance that God is with us and that He will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrew 13:5). I can face virtually anything if I know God is with me and have confidence that He is in control and that somehow this will all work together for good as He has promised.

God's promise to Jacob when he fled from his brother Esau was:

> Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you (Genesis 28:15).

Moses' words to Joshua and the children of Israel before he died were similar:

> Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble at them, for the Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Shortly before He ascended to Heaven, Jesus said to His disciples:

> I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

When we look back on our lives, we will discover that He has never left us nor forsaken us but was with us through it all, working all things together for good and a purpose often beyond our comprehension.

I tell people going through difficult times that God will be proven faithful, so they can trust and thank Him now in the midst of their deep dark valley—because once they get through the valley and wilderness and look back, they will be glad that they did.

Triumphant Examples

Joseph: From being thrown in a pit by his brothers, sold as a slave and put in prison, to becoming second in command of Egypt and saving Israel from starvation.

Esther: From being a captive and slave girl to becoming queen of Persia and saving Israel from annihilation.

Jesus, our best example: From the crucifixion to the resurrection and providing the opportunity of salvation to the entire world.

God allows temporary pain and suffering for this blink-of-an-eye life. Our season of pain and suffering helps us from getting too attached to this world and keeps our hearts longing for something better—anticipation for all He has reserved in eternity for those who love and obey Him.

The Depth of God's Love

There was no other way for God to show all of humanity and the angelic realm the depth of His amazing love throughout eternity, other than through the cross of Jesus Christ. Certainly, He could just *tell* us how much He loves us or lavish on us every imaginable blessing. But that would not fully display the depth of His love: only Jesus' crucifixion ordeal demonstrates His abundant grace:

> For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4:15).

Jesus' suffering and death serve as an everlasting reminder of God's displeasure and intolerance for sin and rebellion. How can fallen humanity, who brought sin and death into God's perfect creation, pay the price to satisfy God's holiness, righteousness and justice? Since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we are without hope. Yet, the sinless Son of God shed His precious blood to appease the wrath of God due us and

made the way for restored relationship with our Creator. Jesus' resurrection provides us confident assurance:

> Knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you (2 Corinthians 4:14).

We can only become a "new creation" through Jesus Christ. How could heaven be heaven, filled with "old creations" in a fallen state, polluting heaven with the same sins which polluted earth: gossip, vulgarity, jealousy, envy, revenge, pride, arrogance, lies, thefts, sexual immorality and perversion? Those who refuse to accept God's great mercy forfeit all He has prepared for those who love Him! There is no other option but separation: to be where God's light and loving presence is not.

God's personal invitation to spend eternity with Him was delivered by His own Son. A familiar and profound scripture gives us a glimpse of His amazing love for His creation:

> For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

First Peter 1:3-9 summarizes our trials in this life as well as the joy and hope we can have in the midst of them because of the eternal inheritance awaiting those who believe in Jesus Christ:

> Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and

> glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls.

The trials and troubles in this life, however severe, are only temporary and nothing in comparison to the glory that will be revealed to those who are God's children.

The apostle Paul said:

> Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

> The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:16-18).

The apostle Peter wrote:

> Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled [or insulted] for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a

troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Peter 4:12-19).

A Call to Crucifixion

What do coming to Christ and a call to ministry have in common with the triumphal entry, the crucifixion and the resurrection?

When someone gives his or her life to Jesus Christ, there is usually great excitement. There is also incredible joy when someone is called by the Lord to go into the mission field or to begin a ministry: work with youth, lead a Bible study, do street ministry, start a prison outreach and so on.

The people rejoiced at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what we commemorate as Palm Sunday. They were confident of the impending blessing and victory over their enemies and anticipated going right from the triumphal entry to the establishment of the messianic kingdom. However, something unexpected—even though Jesus had foretold it several times—followed shortly after the elation of the triumphal entry: Jesus' crucifixion.

This same Jesus who told His disciples of His crucifixion also spoke of a crucifixion that will happen to all who follow Him:

> If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it (Matthew 16:24-25).

In Jesus' command to take up one's cross and follow Him, it is implied that a crucifixion is to take place in the life of every believer. The apostle Paul knew the reality of this crucifixion, for he wrote in his letter to the Galatians:

> I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

Believers' crucifixion experiences are designed to remove pride, greed and anything else that hinders our relationship with God. They are intended to refine us like pure gold through the fire, burning out the lusts of the flesh. Their purpose is to enable us to overcome the lure of the world and temptation by the enemy. They are to teach us full surrender and total commitment. They are to train us to persevere in faith through trials and hardships. They are to mold and conform our lives to the likeness of Jesus Christ and bear much fruit for His glory.

Paul stated in Philippians 3:10:

> That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.

Just as Jesus' story did not end at the crucifixion, neither does our walk with the Lord end at our crucifixion. Following Jesus' crucifixion came the glorious resurrection; after our crucifixion comes an amazing transformation. Our dying to self will result in the resurrection of His goals, dreams, vision and desires in our hearts and ministries. As we lay down our lives for the sake of the gospel, we will be infused with Jesus' resurrection power.

The following pattern will be observed in the life and ministry of virtually every believer. First, the triumphal entry—the initial excitement and joy of coming to Christ and being called by Him to some aspect of ministry or mission. Next, the crucifixion—total surrender and the refining fire of obstacles and opposition. Finally, the resurrection—tremendous blessing and victory for those who faithfully serve Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you are in the midst of a crucifixion experience right now. You may feel hopeless, and the adverse circumstances seem never ending. Do not give up or lose heart but stand strong in your

faith. The Lord is faithful. Soon, His resurrection power will deliver you and transform your life to accomplish His purpose. Apparent defeat will give way to ultimate victory.

Great joy and rejoicing are just beyond the horizon. Your present valley and wilderness will lead the way to a mountaintop and oasis of wonderful blessing. The apostle Paul confidently stated:

> For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

The Point to Ponder

Sometimes, we have to go through life-challenging circumstances and difficult experiences to grow stronger in our faith, to discover more clearly the reality of God's faithfulness, to gain new perspectives and priorities, to learn valuable lessons, to obtain a powerful testimony of God's intervention and deliverance and to become even more effective witnesses for Christ.

Want a Hardship-Free Life?

Jim Weikal, who has served as Biblical Instruction Director at Bill Rudge Ministries for many years, offers valuable insight on hardships.

John chapter 9 focuses on a beggar blind from birth whom Jesus passed as He was leaving the Temple after an altercation with the Jewish religious leaders who wanted to stone Him for asserting His deity (John 8:58). The disciples asked Jesus a question about this man: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this was so that the works of God might be manifested in him" (John 9:2-3 LSB).

"So that the works of God might be manifested in him." That's an intriguing answer! Jesus is saying that my hardships may have a divine purpose? Let's take a look at some examples:

1. Hardships can induce humility (2 Corinthians 12:7 LSB). "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!"

2. Hardships can promote holiness (1 Peter 1:6-7 LSB). "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

3. Hardships can strengthen us for the end times (James 1:2-4 LSB). "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith brings about perseverance. And let perseverance have its perfect work, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

4. Hardships can be a lesson for others (2 Corinthians 1:3-4 LSB). "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

5. Hardships may be caused by natural events (James 1:27 LSB). "Pure and undefiled religion before our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

6. Hardships can bring Christian maturity (Hebrews 12:6 LSB). "FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE FLOGS EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."

In the midst of hardship, a true believer knows through his or her fears and tears, I can turn to Jesus who has said, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)! Who can be with me at 2:00 a.m. in the dark of night at the side of my bed willing to listen as I cry out about my pain?

Jesus saw Mary crying over the death of her brother Lazarus, and He was "deeply moved" and "was troubled" at this very common human sight. So much so that the Creator of the universe "wept" (John 11:32-35).

Jesus knew hardships, the apostles knew hardships and the martyrs of the early church knew hardships. Would any of them change the outcome of their heavenly existence for a hardship-free earthly one? I believe you know the answer.

Many Truths Learned Through Acute Pain

We received the following candid email a few weeks before leaving for India from Dilip, one of the ministers coordinating my speaking engagements in the Himalayan Mountains.

Dear Bill & Karen,

I am back home from the hospital and am well on my way to recovery. The doctor is also not very sure as to how to pinpoint my acute condition from which I suffered immense pain for a little less than a month. Therefore, whatever the acute infection of the bone that I may have suffered has been dealt with by the all-powerful blood of Jesus and the validity of your prayers. I do not have words to express my appreciation for your concern and precious prayers for me. May the Lord keep you well and ever active in His ministry for His glory.

While alone in the hospital, I had the highest privilege of spending intimate time with my Lord. I have been close to the Word. Through tears and brokenness, He has taught me truths in the midst of my acute pain. I thank God for the sufferings He has let me go through so as to make me sensitive to His suffering for me on the Cross and the pains of others.

While in the hospital, I was surrounded by non-believers

who did not think much of Jesus. The reason was obvious: Christians like me have not been making much of Him before the unbelieving world. The Lord has been putting these things right in my life through the time of aloof silence and yearning for His eternal presence. I was able to witness to the nurses and other severely injured patients who took time off to listen and respectfully adhere to the conviction the Lord would bring from His Word. Sometimes I was taken back by the immense sense of respect and dignity with which they would listen to my testimony and the gospel. Something which we Christians lack.

While I lay in immense pain for 3 weeks, I had been given a Walkman and a whole lot of your tapes with testimonies and messages to listen to. Those words the Lord had you speak in those tapes had me burning with the zeal of the Lord to witness and be a willing instrument. I also read some of the newsletters from you and the *Strength Through Weakness* booklet about the harassment you experienced in the Middle East. All these challenged me more than ever. I understood the smallness of my sufferings in the light of the Cross. I was shocked to see how far I was from my original call.

One part of your tour had to be put off for the simple reason that it will be too risky to travel in those areas where much of the time the roads are being guarded by killer gangs who are infiltrating into India from Pakistan. They are being caught by the police and the army, but they are too suicidal in nature and are creating a state of emergency in those areas. This change of schedule will still enable you to not only speak at the large convention but also minister in remote interior mountain corners of Sikkim and Darjeeling district.

Dilip,

Calcutta, India

I was elated when Dilip greeted me in Bagdogra and then drove me and my team to the Himalayan convention and then more than 3,000 kilometers by Jeep to minister throughout the Himalayas.

Lexi
Leah
177
Danielle
Emily

Finding Hope in Tragedy

In this chapter, Dr. BJ Rudge provides hope in the midst of life's darkness.

No one is immune from the tragedies of life.

Our community mourned the death of two high school students and came together in support of two more who were in critical condition following a severe traffic accident while on their way to a Young Life meeting. These four girls were well known, much loved and touched many lives. My family knew these girls and, being the high school girls' soccer coach, I had coached one of the girls who died.

As I spent time at the school talking with faculty and students, I was encouraged and comforted to see everyone come together. It is in moments like these that we learn the most valuable life lessons and are reminded of the importance of community. Not only do we need the support and love of others, but we also need to return that love and support. We need to bear each other's burdens.

Along with the idea of community, I am reminded of the importance of being intentional with loved ones: to never walk away angry, or let the sun go down without letting them know how much they are loved; to live each moment with appreciation for the time that we have with our family and friends. Life can truly change in a moment, so we all need to let others know with our words and actions how much they mean to us.

Through this tragedy, I am also reminded of how important it is to live with purpose. Watching the students flow into the room set

aside for them to come and grieve, I was overwhelmed to hear stories of how their lives have been enriched in knowing the girls who had died. These remarkable young ladies were taken from us too early, but they are remembered through those impacted with their kind words and their positive actions.

From the love and support displayed by the faculty, students and the surrounding schools and communities, I saw God working in and through each one of us. As in any tragedy, the WHY tends to knock us off our feet, but the WHO enables us to stand back up. Though our understanding may be shaken, our faith in Jesus Christ will not be destroyed. His loving arms embrace us and bring comfort and hope in our times of pain and sorrow.

> God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1).

Light in the Darkness

In the weeks following the accident, many questions arose as the community tried to make sense of, and find purpose in, their pain and sorrow. In fact, life's tragedies often cause us to feel the impossibility of walking through the brokenness of a situation while overwhelmed with hopelessness and despair.

When I was in college, my soccer coach took our team into a cold, wet cave. We had an easy time navigating it until Coach told us to turn off our flashlights and find our way out. What had seemed easy before became difficult as we repeatedly hit our heads on the cave walls while desperately seeking the exit. As my teammates and I continued to struggle through the cave, our coach told one of us to turn on a flashlight. The darkness vanished instantly. While in itself the flashlight did not show us the exit, it gave enough light to show us the direction in which to go, and we made our way slowly forward to the bright sunshine just outside the cave.

For those who remain after a tragedy, the challenge is in trying to find our way out of the dark cave of loss—trying desperately to make sense of, and find purpose in, our pain and sorrow. But we no

longer have to navigate the darkness alone. There is a light that can guide us through the darkness of confusion and pain. The girls who died both knew the Source of this light, for each had given her life to Jesus Christ. Because they looked to Him, their lives continue to shine brightly as a reminder of the One that we all can look to: the One who can heal our broken hearts and strengthen our weary souls.

Personally, I have experienced the pain of my wife suffering through a miscarriage; the near loss of our child at one week of age; a daughter coping with chronic pain, eventually requiring seven surgeries to correct; my mother's battle with cancer; and having to witness my father-in-law's daily struggle with liver disease. Experiencing moments like these, we can all find ourselves in a desperate search for any guiding light through the darkness of our situations.

This same Jesus is ready to give light to us all. He hears our cries. He is ready to embrace us in His loving arms and help us move forward through brokenness and pain. While this process may never be fully completed in this life, we have the sure hope that He will one day guide us to that exit to be fully embraced by the true Source of light that awaits us at the end. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we can know the certainty of a future where He will wipe away all tears; where there will be no more death, sorrow or pain (Revelation 21:4).

Until that day, may the legacy of these girls continue on in how we choose to live. Like them, may we embrace the light that Jesus gives, so we, too, may be a light for others.

Jesus spoke to the people once more and said:

> I am the Light of the world; the one who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life (John 8:12).

No matter where you are in your life, remember: The WHY may knock you to the ground, but the WHO is always there to help you stand back up. God has proven Himself to be faithful throughout the

past and will continue to prove faithful as He turns tragedy into triumph.

We received permission from the parents of the girls involved in this tragic accident to share the following:

From Lexi's dad at her funeral:

"We have been overwhelmed with the outpouring of love and support in our community and even distant communities have offered much encouragement, support and prayers.

"I've had time to reflect on what has happened and like everyone else, I asked WHY? It does not seem fair that my baby girl can be here one minute and then taken from us the next. WHY?

"Lexi loved her family, friends, teammates, teachers and neighbors. Lexi spoke to you because she genuinely wanted to share this love with you. Remember the pain you feel now and realize this happened for a reason. God wants us to display the best version of ourselves to one another. Please Wear Your Love on Your Sleeve. Lexi wants us to."

From Danielle's cross-country coach, Barry:

"Danielle had an unbridled enthusiasm and love for life and for the Lord which was evident to everyone on the team. She was a spark who ignited a desire for those around her to serve Christ and a spark on the cross-country team that encouraged others to give their very best. We all still feel the hurt and loss."

From Leah's best friend, Kylie:

"Leah is a light who shines with a love for God. She loves telling people about Jesus and showing them His love through her actions. Leah is a great friend with a great passion for God and a smile that is contagious to everyone who is near."

From Leah's mother, Betsy, from hospital:

When asked in a text from Bill Rudge, "Are you willing to face this tragedy for God to be glorified?" Betsy texted right back, "Yes, we are."

From Emily's mom from hospital:

"It's truly the power of prayer. It's been extremely difficult, but the good Lord is getting us through. You know I really questioned my faith when this all happened. I don't anymore. If our story can change just one person, then I've done my job. I told Emily she is going to do something so good, and I can't wait to see what it is. What God has in store for her... I don't know when, but I hope I'm around to see it."

Why Me? vs. Why NOT Me?

This section was written by Elonna McKibben, a good friend and longtime supporter. Herein, she talks about how she strives to approach suffering in her life.

When we suffer from harm, pain, disagreements, illnesses, accidents, deaths or any manner of calamities, often our first thought is "Why me?" I would suggest that we approach any suffering and adverse situation with the thought: "Why NOT me?"

A trap for many believers is thinking that all of life will be trouble and suffering-free while others fall into self-pity. Because of Adam's sin and fall from grace in the Garden of Eden, there were consequences that passed onto all of creation (Genesis 3:14-19). From that moment on, all who walked upon the face of the earth would face hardship, pain, suffering, illness and, eventually, death.

In my own lifetime, 65 years as of this writing, I have been through much adversity, pain and times of great suffering; faced many events that should have brought about my death; and dealt with many physical illnesses, including an aggressive cancer. One of the most significant times I faced was with my husband, Rob, when as a young married couple, we journeyed through a time of me not getting pregnant. Unfortunately, this began with the miscarriage of our first child. As you can imagine, this was a heartbreaking situation. Finally in year 10 of our marriage, we found that I was pregnant.

With our first ultrasound, four babies were discovered with a

possibility of five. With our next ultrasound, we learned that I was carrying seven. Sadly, two of the seven babies had passed away. My pregnancy was wonderful in the early months. I was so thrilled that after all the years of longing and praying, I was finally pregnant. We felt so blessed to be having quintuplets! Early on, I had no issues that can happen when carrying so many babies. However, around week 18, deep pain in my left hip running down into my leg began, and I noticed shakiness/weakness in my legs when I stood up. The further I went into my pregnancy, the worse my pain and weakness grew. I was able to do less and less, to the point that, after several days of early labor (week 28), I could no longer stand or walk and my pain was non-stop.

The pain became so agonizing the last week of my pregnancy that my physician put me on pain medication. He wanted to hold off the delivery of the babies as long as possible in the hopes that they would have a better chance of survival.

Early in week 30, my body had had enough. I went into labor again. Due to the uniqueness of the situation, there were three to four rows of medical staff watching the birth. Our first two daughters did not cry when delivered. After our second daughter was born, the entire room became completely silent. It was one of those situations where you "could have heard a pin drop." Next, our son was born. When the crowd heard his cries, there was a collective sigh of relief and they all loudly cheered.

When I finally woke up from the anesthesia, my nurse came in and talked with me about how the babies were doing. I was given the devastating news that our second-born daughter had been stillborn. I was able to hold her for a short time. I rocked her and hummed a lullaby as I held her tightly to my chest. I counted fingers and toes, and so wished that she could open her eyes and look into mine.

Once the babies were born, my pain intensified and the weakness continued. My legs just would not cooperate and were like wet noodles when I would try to stand on them. When the babies were 12 days old, testing was begun to figure out what was wrong with

me. After three different tests, we were told I had a lesion on my spinal cord. A lesion is "an area of abnormal or damaged tissue caused by injury, infection or disease." The word "cancer" was never said when talking with us about surgery. In 1989, I was only 30 years old. There was no thought in my mind, or that of Rob's, that we would be dealing with cancer.

On October 12th, I had surgery to remove the lesion. On October 16th, we were given the horrific news that it was not benign but rather a Stage IV very aggressive cancer which is always fatal. I was given only three-to-six months to live with absolutely no hope of seeing my children's first birthdays. Choices of a very radical form of bone marrow chemotherapy and 30 treatments of radiation were offered. However, I was told that these would not give me more time. I still had only the hope for three-to-six months of life. I ended up refusing all medical treatments as they offered no hope. Needless to say, our lives were blown up in pieces. We were numb and devastated at the same time.

When I woke up from surgery, I was completely "dead" from a little above my waistline down into my feet (paraplegia). The connection between my brain and spinal cord was broken, so my lower body did not understand touch anymore and could not move normally. Any touch to the lower part of my body made me feel like I was being burned in that area. The nerves needed to repair and reconnect with the brain, but this takes time.

After about 2 years, and with therapy, some nerves repaired and the brain/spinal cord connection somewhat re-grew. I am now what is called a " functional" paraplegic.

My original pain changed immediately after the surgery, but it did not go away. Rather, it became the most excruciating pain I have ever experienced in my life. I cannot even adequately describe it or, convey in words, its intensity. As my cancer healed using an alternative method, my pain changed again. Because of the spinal cord damage, I have had continuous, daily pain since 1989. It is now just nerve pain, but this can range from mild to very intense. On any given day, I can have deep aching, throbbing, tingling, fire-type

burning feelings, electric-like jolts and/or drawing spasms (in any combination). I have had to turn to medication to control these enough that they are in the background so I can still function for the day.

I have detailed some of the time frames of my pregnancy, cancer and recovery above as they are the most impactful and insightful as to God's working in my/our lives in the midst of a very intense time of suffering and pain for myself and for Rob. I have experienced many more such times in my lifetime. There are too many to detail herein; however, below I have listed a few more:

- I had a massive pulmonary embolism where I passed multiple blood clots into both lungs. It was the type of event that the majority of individuals do not survive.
- In 2010, while walking, I fell at a weird angle with my right knee connecting into the hardwood floor first. This caused my femur (large leg bone) to break in two places and crushed my knee. A rod was placed into my femur and six screws were needed to put my knee back together. This was followed by a year of additional therapy to regain strength and better movement.
- I have had too many surgeries to detail. The most recent have been a left knee replacement in 2019 and an initial right knee replacement in 2020. In 2020 through 2022, three more right knee surgeries followed due to infection. I have been in physical therapy ever since, attempting to regain my strength and better movement.
- From 2015 to the present, I have had issues with painful kidney stones. These create urinary tract infections, which have required multiple medications (both oral and intravenous) along with numerous hospitalizations and multiple surgical procedures for their removal. The stones also can cause an intense, deep, aching pain in my mid-back area that is called the "flank" (around the rib area). When the stones leave the kidneys naturally, they cause burning

> and pain when urinating. Often, my urine is full of blood. After more than nine years, I am still dealing with these issues.

I endeavor to approach every time of suffering and every hospitalization knowing that God is in control; that He has my best interests; that He loves me far more than I could ever imagine; and that He has a purpose and plan in place for my life. I strive to be kind, loving and to radiate joy and laughter, especially when hospitalized. I want to reflect the glory of our God. I am not perfect in these endeavors, but I am a work in progress. I have been able to share my testimony during each hospitalization with many, many individuals. God brings those who need to hear it into my room.

I have written all the above in hopes that you will truly see that I know and have experienced many, many situations where I could have lapsed into a poor pity me state of defeat with the "Why Me?" attitude and frame of mind/heart. I would suggest that, if there is the right mindset and attitude of heart, we will have the right thought processes in any suffering we face. Keeping our eyes on the One who has overcome this world will keep us in the right mindset!

Paul said in Romans 5:3-4 NKJV:

> And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

The Message Bible states:

> The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out. But I, God, search the heart and examine the mind (Jeremiah 17:9-10).
>
> God, pick up the pieces. Put me back together again. You are my praise! (Jeremiah 17:14).

Peace in Times of Uncertainty

Dr. BJ Rudge explains what peace is and how to obtain it.

We all experience times of uncertainty; moments that raise many questions and concerns about what we should do and how things will work out. So too, Jesus' disciples experienced their times of uncertainty. For about three years, the disciples had served at the side of Jesus where they were direct recipients of His daily teachings and eyewitnesses to His miraculous power. Now, they were confronted with the uncertainty that Jesus was going to leave them and with the uncertainty of the implications to follow. Just as it would be today, we find in John chapters 14 to 17 many "what," "how," "why," "where" and "when" questions (John 14:5, 22; 16:17-18). In response to their questions, Jesus asserted that, even though we will have tribulation in this world, we can have peace because He has overcome the world (John 16:32-33).

In light of these words by Jesus, we are addressing here three specific questions about the peace that Jesus offered His disciples and is available to us right now.

Question #1: What is this peace?

The peace that Jesus gives (John 14:27) does not come from this world. Instead of trying to find it by looking to others (politicians, celebrities, etc.) or looking within, the peace Jesus provides can only be found by looking to Him. The idea of peace that the world promotes is a life without conflict and difficulty, but there are problems with this approach to peace: It is *circumstantial*. In other

words, it is a peace that solely depends upon your situation and conditions. Because it is contingent on changing events, a worldly approach to peace is *temporary*. Certainly, we all have moments when life goes well and we do not face any direct conflicts or challenges. But, we also know that this peace is short-lived because we are all going to face tribulation, conflicts and difficulties—feeling pressured or squeezed to the point we feel confined with no way to escape as the uncertain times in which we live have robbed many of peace. But, while the peace of this world depends upon life's circumstances, the peace that Jesus provides *transcends* our worldly cares and concerns. We do not have to wait for circumstances to change.

Jesus' peace impacts our lives by producing courage. Amidst their questions and fear, Jesus told the disciples to "take courage" (John 16:33). This is the courage of confidence that rests not in ourselves, nor in our circumstances, but in the God we serve. Consider Joshua who faced uncertainty as he led the children of Israel into the Promised Land. As he took on this momentous task, God instructed him to "be strong and courageous! Do not be terrified nor dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9). The key for Joshua's courage did not rest in his own ability but in the fact that he served a faithful God who would be with him. Joshua was told to meditate upon God's law (Joshua 1:8), so that he would not only have a proper understanding of what to do, but a proper understanding of the One (God) who called him to do it.

Jesus' peace impacts our lives by the removal of anxiety and fear. As Paul sat in a prison for preaching the gospel, he wrote these powerful words:

> Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

Despite his circumstances and the uncertain outcome, Paul still

had the peace of God, a peace that Paul reminds all believers will guard us from being controlled by anxiety, doubt and fear.

Question #2: How is peace provided?

When we examine John 14 to 17, we discover two ways Jesus provides this peace: first, through the *presence* of the Holy Spirit (John 14:25-26; 15:26-27). "Helper" refers to someone who has been called to come alongside to help and plead the cause of someone else. This is exactly what the Holy Spirit did in the lives of the apostles as He provided them with wisdom, guidance and strength. In fact, Jesus goes on to say that it was for their advantage that He leaves them and sends the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). How could it be an advantage for the disciples that Jesus would leave them? What could be more spiritually advantageous than literally walking and talking with Jesus? By forcing the disciples to step out of their comfort zone, they could learn to trust God in a deeper way and experience the Holy Spirit's presence and power.

My sister and brother-in-law watched their only son leave for the Navy. But, knowing they had raised him to love the Lord, the sadness of seeing him go also brought with it the joy and confidence that God would continue to work in his life in a deeper and more powerful way. Sometimes, the only way to grow is to step out of our comfort zones and encounter the uncertainties of life with faith and trust. Thankfully, we do not have to do this in our own strength because we have the active presence of the Holy Spirit who, right now, can strengthen and empower us in our inner being (Ephesians 3:16).

The second way Jesus provides His peace is through the fellowship (unity) of believers. As Christians, we are not designed to live as islands unto ourselves. Instead, we are called to live out our faith within the community of other brothers and sisters in Christ. Before Jesus faced His arrest, trial and crucifixion, He specifically prayed for the unity of all believers (John 17:20-21). Unity within the body of Christ occurs both on a doctrinal level (what we believe) and

on a practical level (how we live out our faith). When we go through uncertain and difficult times, it is our function as the body of Christ, on this practical level, to encourage and bear each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2).

I have several friends with whom I meet on a monthly basis to pray. They have been a source of peace in my life as I have been for them when they faced times of uncertainty. As the body of Christ, Jesus wants us to face our life problems unified, so we may have the peace that comes through the support and love of each other. As believers in Jesus Christ, may we be unified during times of uncertainty so we can be instruments of hope and peace to a world desperately needing them.

Question #3: How can I experience this peace?

If you want to experience the peace of Jesus right now, the very first thing you must do is *repent* of your sin and *accept* Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. The Holy Spirit will dwell within you and begin to produce the fruit of His Spirit in your life—one of which is peace (Galatians 5:22-23). Second, you must place your trust in God and not your circumstances. This act of trust will require you to yield your will to God's will. Jesus provides the best example of this as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42).

Knowing the agony of what He was about to experience, Jesus surrendered His will so that He could fulfill the will of His Father. This same attitude is what we need to display when we face times of uncertainty. We need to trust God and yield to His will, even when it does not seem to line up with what we want. Happily, we have the confidence that we are surrendering ourselves to a sovereign God who is not only in control of every detail of our lives, but truly has our best interests at heart.

Childlike Faith

My daughter asked me what it means to have childlike faith. I responded by telling her that, just as children trust their parents, we, too, need to trust God. In other words, we must learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

The very next day, as I was helping to clean up after dinner, I was thinking about all of the decisions that my wife and I were facing and the challenges we had as a family. After four ankle surgeries, my oldest daughter was still having significant pain. What should we do? Should we consult another doctor and face the possibility of a fifth surgery? My second oldest daughter was still dealing with post- concussion issues, even though a year had passed. Would she ever experience relief from her headaches? Would we have to go through another round of vision therapy? The reality of all the medical bills with my daughters' issues began to concern me. How would we pay for them?

The difficulties in my personal life seemed only to intensify with the proliferation of the coronavirus and its impact on our lives and nation. Did we have enough food and supplies? What would we do if one of us gets sick? Will we have enough income to pay needed bills?

Feeling overwhelmed with all these questions running through my mind, I looked out our kitchen window and saw my two youngest daughters on our trampoline playing with their Barbie dolls. In the midst of all that was going on in my life and the world, they were content and at peace. It was at that moment when God impressed on my heart what it means to have childlike faith. It did not mean I would go through life with no problems or challenges, but in the midst of them, like my children, I could still have peace and joy.

Just as my children's peace and joy rested in the fact that they knew their mother and I would take care of their needs, so, too, we can have peace and joy knowing that our heavenly Father will also take care of our needs.

As we all face difficulties and challenges (many more extreme than mine), may we live with a childlike faith in a God who is truly

our refuge in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1).

Loving Your Enemies in Persecution

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount which is contained within Matthew chapters 5 through 7. Each Beatitude begins with the Greek word *makarioi*, which means "blessed, happy or fortunate."

One beatitude leads to the next: The poor in spirit mourn over their sin, then in meekness and humility, receive God's grace and forgiveness. They hunger and thirst after righteousness so as to live a life that is pleasing to their Creator. They show mercy to those who offend them because they have received mercy through Jesus Christ. They desire to have a pure heart (body, mind and spirit) before the Lord with whom they walk. They are peacemakers who seek to lead others to peace with God and also to peacefully resolve conflicts in their church, home and community. And they are willing to be persecuted and insulted for the name of Christ and God's Word and for the sake of righteousness.

Matthew 5:10-12 says:

> Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This beatitude, out of them all, is perhaps the most difficult to accept. It contains a paradox regarding the "blessing of persecution." However, if you are suffering because you are a meddler, busybody or troublemaker, then you are not being persecuted for your faith but reaping what you sow.

Now, let's focus on the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How questions regarding persecution.

Who Are the Persecutors?

Every Christian should expect to experience some form of persecution. Jesus said, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you" (John 15:18). I have numerous photos from various mission trips around the world of the faces and stories of persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ.

Persecution of God's people began from the beginning of creation. It started in Genesis 3:15 with the enmity between the godly seed of woman and the rebellious seed of the serpent. These two different lines of people—those who honored the Creator and those who rebelled—first manifested with Cain killing his brother Abel. The Bible records that the persecution of God's people continued throughout both the Old and New Testaments and throughout history.

The Philistines, Amalekites and other nearby nations attacked the Jews who worshiped the one True God. However, when Israel fell into the same idolatry as the nations around her, the Jewish people, and oftentimes the Jewish leaders, persecuted the prophets sent by God to turn their hearts back to the Lord.

Moses was persecuted by the very people he led out of Egyptian bondage. David was persecuted and pursued by King Saul after killing Goliath for him. The prophet Elijah was persecuted by wicked King Ahab and Queen Jezebel for opposing Baal worship. Jeremiah was persecuted for prophesying God's judgment if the people and leaders of Judah persisted in idolatry and immorality. Daniel was thrown into a lions' den for praying to the Lord three times a day

while exiled in Persia.

Hebrews 11:32-39:

> And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

New Testament Examples of Courage

Consider the courage of Stephen as he boldly spoke in the power of God's Spirit to the Jewish Sanhedrin even though it would cost him his life (Acts 7:51-60). Stephen's death no doubt had a later influence on Saul, who had approved of his stoning:

> When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep. Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in

> Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (Acts 7:58–8:1).

One of the most zealous opponents of the early church was Saul of Tarsus, later known as the apostle Paul. On the road to Damascus, with persecution on his mind, Saul had a dramatic conversion (Acts 9:1-9). Acts 9:10-16 gives additional details:

> Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight." But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did to Your saints at Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

On one of his missionary journeys to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul, accompanied by Barnabas, healed a crippled man in Lystra (Acts 14:8-10). The people wanted to offer sacrifices to them, thinking them to be gods. Paul and Barnabas refused (Acts 14:11-18). In spite of the fervor of the town's infatuation with Paul and Barnabas, their popularity was short-lived, and Paul was stoned in Lystra (Acts 14:19). Miraculously, he recovered and went immediately back into Lystra, staying there until the next day (Acts 14:20).

Time after time, Paul returned to cities where people had previously tried to kill him. Why did he keep returning when he knew to do so would be life threatening? He went back to strengthen and

encourage the new disciples (Acts 14:21-23). What boldness and courage Paul exhibited in doing the Lord's work! That is the kind of courage I want.

Persecution and Torture

All the New Testament writers, except for John, were martyred for their faith. According to early Church tradition, Peter was reported to have been crucified upside down in a Roman arena. Paul was beheaded by order of Nero. James was thrown off the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and then beaten to death with clubs. It is said that Roman emperor Domitian commanded that the apostle John be boiled to death in oil, but John only continued to preach from within the pot. Thus, John, the head of the church in Ephesus at the time, was exiled to the Isle of Patmos when he could have been imprisoned, enslaved or executed instead.

During early church history, many Christians were tortured, burned at the stake, thrown to wild animals or beheaded. Some were made to serve as objects of amusement; others were clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs. Some were crucified; others were set on fire to illuminate the night: it is said that Emperor Nero had Christians set afire as human torches to light his gardens.

Shortly before his martyrdom, the apostle Paul wrote that committed believers should expect persecution and suffering (2 Timothy 3:10-12). Being persecuted for faith in Jesus Christ and God's Word has continued throughout church history. Multitudes of believers have been stoned, drowned, had their brains beaten out with clubs and their tongues cut out; were stretched on racks or wheels until their joints were dislocated or bones broken; had boiling tar poured over them; were roasted alive like a pig on a spit; were dragged through streets by horses; had their stomachs cut open and grain put inside, then pigs let loose to feed on the grain and their intestines; had their noses or hands cut off and many other horrific tortures.

Hebrews 10:32-36 encourages us:

> But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

What if you were made to choose: renounce Christ or be beheaded? Would you die or deny? We can find strength from God to remain faithful. If one day I die for Christ, the Lord has assured me that my life will not be taken until His purpose is fulfilled. My prayer is, "Lord, let me have the grace, the power, the boldness and the forgiveness of Stephen" (Acts 6:8–7:60).

Christians throughout the world today suffer a wide variety of increasing hostilities and oppression: loss of freedoms, jobs and income; confiscated property and imprisonment; intensifying persecutions such as being forced into servitude; forced to watch as spouses or children are executed, raped or taken as sex slaves; their houses and churches burned to the ground—sometimes with entire congregations inside—having toes, fingers, hands, noses or heads cut off, and other atrocities—only because they believe the Bible and are committed to Jesus Christ.

By God's grace alone, we can endure such things. Although the world is not worthy of them (Hebrews 11:38), Scripture tells of God's high regard for those who long "for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them" (Hebrews 11:16). The splendor of the New Jerusalem is only partially unveiled in Revelation chapters 21 and 22.

Statistics

According to some recent statistics, more than 70 million Christians have been martyred in the course of history. More than half were martyred in the twentieth century under communist and fascist governments. It is widely believed that Christian persecution is worse today than at any other time in history.

Not only intensifying worldwide, open hostility and persecution of Christians is increasing in the United States. Christians are being arrested for peacefully praying at abortion clinics, preaching and quoting Scripture at events whose precepts are contrary to biblical morality. According to the Bible, Christian persecution is going to get worse—far worse!

What Is Persecution?

The word "persecute" carries the idea of pursuit—to run after with intensity; to chase after you with intent to harm in some way. Persecution of Christians is the act of harassing, harming, oppressing or killing people who believe in Jesus Christ. It also includes insults, lies (falsely speaking evil against you) and verbal or written attacks. Persecution also consists of:

- Being mocked for believing in Jesus or ridiculed for believing the Bible
- Maligning your character and integrity in public
- Being disowned, divorced or abandoned
- Being censured (expressing severe disapproval of someone or something) on social media, college campuses, schools, work and so on
- Spreading lies and untrue rumors about you in an effort to discredit your testimony
- Being fired from your job because you are a Christian or terminated as a coach for praying

- Being reprimanded by a superior officer for praying in Jesus' name
- Being arrested for praying outside an abortion clinic or quoting Scripture in a public forum

Pit Stop

Shortly after I gave my life to Christ at the age of 18, the Lord led me to leave my job as an instructor in a health spa. Like Moses, who gave up the riches of Egypt, I turned down my dream job as a fitness instructor and stayed at Pit Stop changing oil in cars—standing in a pit, getting oil and grease all over me—before leaving for Bible college.

But, the Lord put me there with two other Christians who were like Peter and Paul to disciple me and to help me grow. However, they both left after a few months for better jobs. To make matters worse, Tim, the new man hired as manager, hated Christians and loved to make it miserable for me. Repeatedly he recorded fewer hours than I actually worked.

Another man, Rich from Virginia, was hired. He was a nice guy, but was stealing money and letting me take the blame. The manager accused me of stealing the money and tried to have me fired, until the owner finally caught Rich and fired him.

It was a time of real struggle and growth for me from the pressure this manager put on me. One day, I almost threw the manager into the pit for what he said and did, but God used it to mold my life. Eventually, this manager was fired. When he left, he apologized to me for how he had treated me and said I was someone who truly lived my Christianity. That was, probably, the greatest compliment I could receive and made all that had happened worthwhile.

Teen Life and Kids Life

When I started Teen Life and Kids Life, all I wanted to do was help

youth, and, because of its growth and success, many people tried to undermine it. "Who do you think you are starting a ministry? You will certainly fail."

My response was, "Either help me or step out of the way, because I am going to do it with or without you." Some people still opposed me, so eventually God moved them out of the way. Some moved away; some resigned their position; some died; some faded into obscurity; and some later repented and began to help the ministry.

The accounts above pale in comparison to what many believers around the world, and even now in America, are experiencing. Nevertheless, as a new Christian, it was significant persecution to me.

In whatever form persecution comes, we should be encouraged by the apostle Peter's admonition: "If you are reviled [or insulted] for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Peter 4:14).

When Did Persecution Begin?

Since the beginning of creation, persecution has occurred throughout history and will continue into the future Tribulation period. From Cain and Abel to Zechariah (the last prophet to be martyred in the Old Testament) to John the Baptist (the first prophet to be martyred in the New Testament; from Stephen (the first Christian martyred in the New Testament) to Antipas (the last martyr mentioned in the New Testament in Revelation 2:13); from Christian martyrs throughout church history to today, persecution continues. We know from God's Word that the worst persecution in the history of humanity will culminate in the Tribulation.

Where Does Persecution Occur?

During New Testament times, Christians were persecuted by Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah, by Roman officials

for not worshipping the emperor as God, by pagans for not worshiping their gods and by apostate Christians.

Today, persecution comes from many sources: the world at large, government, religious people, co-workers, friends and even family members.

The World

1 John 3:13: "Do not be surprised, brothers and sisters, if the world hates you."

1 John 3:10: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother."

Once again, we see the two lines consisting of those who honor the Creator and those who rebel against Him.

Government

Persecution sometimes comes from governmental authorities in the form of fines, confiscation of property, removal of children from the home, imprisonment or execution. The goal is often to shame the victim, isolate them from the general population and make an example of them in order to control the behavior of others.

In AD 64, Nero blamed Christians for the burning of Rome, and so began a great persecution.

In Hindu and Muslim countries, Christians have been arrested and punished on false accusations such as paying people to convert to Christianity. While monetarily bribing someone to convert to Christianity rarely—if ever—happens, these same government officials often look the other way when Christians are being beaten or killed. A true Christian does not force, nor can they coerce, a true acceptance of Christ. True acceptance of Christ is of the heart and happens within an individual. Extremist Hindus and Muslims have forced many people to either outwardly convert or else be killed or suffer a fate worse than death.

Mark 13:9 cautions:

> But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the

> courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them.

Religious People

Pagans and those who worshiped various gods oftentimes persecuted followers of Jesus Christ. Some of the harshest persecution can come from nominal, lukewarm and apostate Christians. The Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, persecuted Jesus the most.

Jesus warned His disciples:

> They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God (John 16:2).

Co-Workers, Friends and Family

Colleagues, acquaintances and relatives can sometimes be relentless in their opposition to those fully committed to Jesus Christ. Matthew 10:21: "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death."

Matthew 10:36 says, "and A MAN'S ENEMIES WILL BE THE MEMBERS OF HIS HOUSEHOLD."

In many families, an unbelieving partner or parent has taunted—even tormented—a spouse or child for having faith in Christ.

Why Are Christians Persecuted?

Jesus said in Matthew 5:10, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness." People want to persecute Christians because Christians are righteous, and the persecutors are not.

Righteousness

Why did Cain murder his brother? He was enraged with jealousy and became hostile, because Abel was righteous, and he was not. Abel's

sacrifice was accepted by God, while Cain's was not (Genesis 4:3-7).

To avoid persecution, you must conform to the world. You must live like them, attend their parties, celebrate the lifestyles they celebrate, don't witness to them about Jesus Christ or quote scripture that offends them.

Remember Jesus' words:

> For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

Word of God and Testimony of Jesus

Revelation indicates believers will be persecuted for two main things during the Tribulation: the Word of God and their testimony of Jesus. Is it not most interesting that these are the two main things under assault today? A movement of open aggression against the Bible and the name and testimony of Jesus grows globally—and we have not yet even entered the Tribulation period!

The apostle John was exiled to Patmos, because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 1:9). Martyrs will be slain in the Tribulation period, because of the Word of God and, because of the testimony, which they maintain (Revelation 6:9). Satan will be enraged and make war with those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 12:17). Believers will be martyred during the Tribulation, because of their testimony of Jesus and, because of the Word of God (Revelation 20:4).

The War on Christ

Today, there is a deliberate and intensifying war against Christ in America and, around the world, orchestrated by those who hate God and His Word and desire to eradicate every vestige of faith in Jesus Christ. Why? Who is motivating it? What are they doing? Where is it

leading?

Virtually everything that has to do with the Bible is ridiculed and pushed out of our society—even so in many churches. Things contrary to God's nature and Scripture are welcomed and embraced. Instead of learning what pleases the Lord, today's generation dishonors Him and flaunts every imaginable behavior disgraceful to His eyes. Idolatrous and immoral practices are becoming the norm.

Anti-Christian propaganda by media moguls ignite the flames of hostility against those who do not accept, endorse, celebrate and practice their depraved morality. Oppression, harassment and persecution are on the rise in America and the world as the attacks (in many forms and from various sources) increase. Removal of crosses and the Ten Commandments from public places has become the norm. Laws are being passed to limit what pastors and Christians can do or say in an effort to intimidate the church into silence concerning biblical truth and sin. The winds of persecution are now blowing across America as they have in much of the world because of increasing hostility toward the God of the Bible and His moral standards.

Persecution of believers in Jesus is intensifying worldwide with a premeditated global goal to systematically purge the Earth of the followers of Jesus Christ: attacks on social media, threats of violence, arrests, fines, resettlement, confiscation of property, vandalism of churches, imprisonment, forced labor, servitude, sexual slavery, torture, mutilation, execution and martyrdom are being faced by growing numbers of Christians.

Biblical truth is being undermined. Secular scientists and much of the media expound erroneous theories of evolution as factual; many liberal theologians and lukewarm pastors are undermining the Bible, denying the accuracy and authority of Scripture, contradicting the creation account in Genesis, rejecting Jesus as the only way of salvation, discounting His resurrection, ridiculing the rapture and Second Coming, doing away with the biblical concept of hell and so on. They resort to "human wisdom" (e.g., a loving God would not send anyone to hell) in an attempt to refute biblical truth. They

distort, twist and falsify Scripture (e.g., everyone goes to Heaven).

The Bible offends. Scripture is offensive to those who do not want to acknowledge the Creator and God, to whom they will one day give an account. The Bible exposes sin and confronts the lifestyles of the godless; thereby angering those who do not want to live by its moral standards. Fear and respect for God and His Word have been replaced with indifference or disdain.

The Coming Persecution

A global persecution of Christians will intensify beyond what the world has ever seen. It will also be upon Christians in America, in full measure, if the Lord tarries His return much longer.

Back in the 1980s, after much prayer, fasting and biblical research, I warned about what I saw coming: America's decline, apostasy, the persecution of Christians in U.S., the move to a New World Order with a one-world government and monetary system and a unified world religion. What seemed to many to be impossible and far removed then is now at our doorstep.

The greatest peril facing America today is that she has forsaken the Lord. God has been legislated out of our schools, government and many other facets of our culture, while Eastern, occult, atheistic and New Age beliefs and practices are welcomed.

Since the 1980s when persecution of Christians seemed inconceivable in the United States (the Moral Majority having been dominant between 1979-1989), I have endeavored to prepare the body of Christ through written and spoken messages about an unprecedented wave of persecution coming to America and intensifying in virtually every part of the world. Those who maintain a testimony that Jesus is the only way of salvation and refuse to compromise their moral convictions based upon Scripture are facing increasing opposition and hostility.

Today, conservative Christians in America are becoming like the Jews in Nazi Germany shortly before the "night of broken glass." The only difference is we have nowhere to escape because changing

laws and advanced technology are creating an environment for persecution that will envelop the entire world. Jesus foretold a time when there would be "great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will. Unless those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short" (Matthew 24:21-22). But, as the Lord spoke to my heart while writing this very chapter: Morning is coming after these dark nights. One day, you may be arrested in America for quoting the Bible on social media, praying in a public forum or witnessing on the street about your faith in Jesus Christ, as is already happening to many Christians in various parts of the world.

Why Suffering and Martyrdom?

I used to wonder why Peter, Paul and other Bible heroes, as well as many believers throughout history, had to be martyred, and why so many today are giving up their lives for Christ. It seemed like defeat. I thought a better testimony would be for God to supernaturally intervene and deliver His people, which He has sometimes done, but not always (Hebrews 11). Later, I came to understand that enduring suffering for Christ was a sign and a seal upon the authentic nature of their testimony. When the world observed their unwavering faith—even in the face of death—they were more prepared to believe the message of the witness because it had been validated with their own lives.

The Greek word for witness is *martus* or *martur*, which means "one who bears witness by his death." This definition is proven in the lives of those who lived and died for what they believed. God's Spirit transformed them. Peter, on the night of Jesus' arrest, cowered at the accusations of a slave girl, but after seeing the resurrected Christ, he became the man who not only boldly witnessed for Christ in Jerusalem (the very city where He was crucified), but courageously gave up his life for the Lord, being crucified upside down.

Leonard Ravenhill said, "He who fears God fears no man. He who kneels before God will stand in any situation." During times of prayer and fasting, I get on my knees before the Lord so He can strengthen me by His Spirit to stand in any situation.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:28: "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

Oppressors may be brave and bold when they persecute those who believe in Jesus, but they will not be so brave and bold when they face the wrath of the Lamb (Revelation 6:16-17). They will be terrified when they "fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

I would rather die living for the Lord, than live denying Him. And, since most believers want to have the courage to die for Christ, it makes sense that we must necessarily have the courage to totally live for Him as well.

What America needs today is repentance, revival and restoration, but that often comes because of persecution. Persecution refines and purifies the church and makes it stronger and more committed to Christ.

There seems to be a "biblical balance" of both blessings and difficulties. I have been greatly blessed by the Lord in many ways, yet have also suffered and sacrificed much for the cause of Christ.

Iranian Center

In July 2002, my wife traveled with me as I ministered in the Netherlands and England. In London, I spoke at the Iranian Center before the World Soccer Cup. I was told not to mention Israel or that I was American. The response to my message on "Overcoming Giants and God's Boot Camp" was excellent from both Christians and Muslims.

A young lawyer at the Iranian Center told me he had been imprisoned and tortured in Iran because he mentioned that perhaps

God is a God of love. After a few months, he was released and able to get a visa, but only to Japan. In Japan, a little old missionary woman gave him a tract in Persian. It told about the love and forgiveness of God. He said, "This is the God I always knew existed when I was in Iran." He gave his life to Jesus Christ, and is now a powerful witness to the Muslims. He said, "If Iranians had a choice, most of them would become Christians."

Another former Muslim told me how he had escaped from Iran to Greece then to England. One Iranian man, thanked me and said that it was the exact message he needed to hear. He said he could not have gone on another day without hearing it.

Strength in Times of Suffering

When the Amalekites raided David's camp and took captive all the women and children, David was in great distress. First Samuel 30:6 says:

> David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.

David strengthened himself in the Lord by remembering God's faithfulness in the past. David put his trust in, and received assurance from, the One who had always been with him. Like David, when we are distressed, we must strengthen ourselves in the Lord and reflect on His faithfulness throughout Scripture and in our lives.

No matter how dark the valley, how difficult the circumstances or how intense the storms of life, we have a blessed hope: "Looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus" (Titus 2:13). Jesus is coming again to establish His kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy. This blessed hope will most assuredly become reality for all eternity.

Shortly after the apostle Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city of Lystra, supposedly dead (Acts 14:19), he stated: "Through

many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

In Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten with rods, thrown into prison and their feet fastened in stocks (Acts 16). "But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). How they handled this persecution was observed by the other prisoners, and resulted in the jailer and his family becoming believers (Acts 16:34).

In Acts 5, Peter and the others with him were flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus before being released. On their way from the presence of the Council (Sanhedrin), they rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ (Acts 5:40-42).

In one of his epistles, the apostle Peter states:

> For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:20-23).

Persecuted Brothers and Sisters in Christ

While speaking to the U.S. military in October 1990, shortly before many troops were deployed for Desert Storm, I also had an opportunity to speak in a large West German house church. Among American GIs and people from East Germany, Russia, Poland and Romania, there also was a man from Egypt. Following my message, this Egyptian man told me his story. When he became a Christian, his Muslim family threw him off a train in an attempt to kill him, which resulted in the loss of his arm. This man, who had paid a

tremendous price for giving his life to Christ, was requesting prayer that he may know and serve Jesus even more.

Idelette was a beautiful Christian Haitian, who was tortured by a witch doctor but refused to renounce her faith in Jesus. Years later, the witch doctor and Idelette's mother (who gave her to the witch doctor to be tortured) both came to faith in Jesus Christ—in great part because of Idelette's testimony and willingness to suffer persecution for Jesus Christ.

While leading a Holy Land Adventure, I visited a pastor in Bethlehem, who had suffered much for the cause of Christ. Pastor Naim Khoury shared his amazing testimony with our group at his church in Bethlehem. He had been shot multiple times and his church had been set on fire and the windows broken on several occasions. His brother was martyred in Bethlehem by three men with machetes; yet, he continued to courageously proclaim the gospel in this extremely dangerous Muslim area—using loudspeakers on top of his church to proclaim the gospel to the neighborhood. Pastor Khoury said he will continue to proclaim the gospel until the day he dies.

I was invited to speak at an Arab Center in California to people from several Muslim countries, who knew firsthand suffering and persecution for Christ. Some were Arabic instructors at the Defense Language Institute at the Presidio of Monterey in California. I was introduced to Josef from Iraq, who was Saddam Hussein's English translator during Desert Storm. Josef told me that when the U. S. was hitting Iraqi targets with such accuracy, he was falsely accused of providing secret information to the Allies and was tortured for several months. While he was being beaten, his attackers noticed that he was smiling and they stopped. He shared with them how he was blessed to suffer for Christ. After the war, he and his pregnant wife fled Iraq to Jordan before coming to America.

Instead of denying Jesus Christ, Josef chose to believe Jesus' words: "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way

they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11-12).

There are many others in the U.S., and across the world, I have either met or heard about from eyewitnesses who have suffered for the cause of Christ. These courageous Christians are part of God's elite "heroes of the faith," whom God will one day richly reward! Jesus promises persecuted Christians that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). So "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great" (Matthew 5:12). Read Revelation 21 and 22 to get a glimpse of what is ahead for believers in Jesus Christ.

The good news is that, in spite of the hatred, betrayal and persecution of Christians, the gospel will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations.

The overall theme of Revelation is Christ's victory. The book of Revelation is a reminder not only to the churches of Asia, but to all believers, that ultimately Christ will be victorious, and He will reign as King. This revelation to John was meant to encourage and comfort the believers of the seven churches (and all believers everywhere throughout time) as they faced persecution, and to motivate them to continue to persevere in their faith in Jesus Christ. Though surrounded by suffering and persecution, they could rest on the promise and hope that Christ will be triumphant in the end.

That Great Multitude

You may be facing strong peer pressure today, feeling like you are in the shrinking minority because almost everyone at school, college or work rejects the Bible as God's unique revelation of truth. However, one day, you will be with the billions of people since creation—heroes of the faith, prophets, kings, warriors, disciples, martyrs from every generation throughout history, men and women, children and teens from across the globe—who resisted the pressures of their day and became part of that great multitude, who will inherit all that the Lord has prepared for those who love and honor Him; believers from throughout the ages will live with God forever. Those already in

Heaven will, one day, be joined by a vast host:

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues [languages], standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands (Revelation 7:9).

On that Day, when Jesus Christ establishes His eternal Kingdom, those whose names are written in the Book of Life will receive all He has prepared for those who love Him and obey His Word. We will have endless time to enjoy and explore the wonders of a restored paradise on Earth and share in the countless adventures that await us throughout the expanse of the entire universe. We will never cease to be amazed by the glory of our God and overjoyed with the blessings He will lavish on His children.

By contrast, those who reject God's offer of salvation in this life to enjoy the convenience of compromise, pleasure, popularity or prestige will be named among the "cowardly" mentioned in Revelation 21:8. They will forfeit God's blessed Kingdom, quarantined from His glorious presence.

If you cannot resist peer pressure now, then you had better let God infuse you with His power because a day is coming in the near future when all of society will be in total rebellion against the Lord and hostile toward His people; it will cost to stand for Jesus Christ.

Revelation 21:8 says:

> But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

Why the cowardly? Because the cowardly, the compromiser and worldly conformist will, for the sake of convenience or out of fear for loss of power, prestige, property or life, refuse God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ (even though they are convinced of its truth), or they will deny Him in times of persecution. Unless they truly repent, the cowardly are no better off than the murderers, sexually

immoral and idolators who will be outcasts from God's eternal kingdom.

Don't succumb to the seductive spirit of this age. Don't compromise your faith and fashion your lifestyle to the current cultural trends and popular morality standards. Be encouraged, rather, by the throngs of people who have gone before you and whose testimonies spur you on:

> Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1).

Be a part of the millions of people alive on this planet today who faithfully serve and honor Jesus Christ in spite of ridicule, oppression, opposition, hostility, persecution and someday, even martyrdom. You will never regret serving Jesus Christ, and everyone who rejects Him will regret that decision—eternally.

The Challenge

Believers throughout the history of the Church have fought in the "arena of life" to proclaim the gospel. Now, it is our time to stand strong in the "arena" for Christ. We must not shrink back or cower in fear. That great cloud of witnesses—in fact, all of Heaven—is watching and cheering us on!

If you have hurt or need to forgive someone, desire to repent of bitterness and revenge; need strength; want to know the Lord; now is the time to pause and voice a prayer to the Lord. Deal with it now, so you can leave it behind and press on.

Live your life in such a way so as to praise and glorify the Lord in every aspect of your life—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

How Will It All Work Out?

The God who created us and died for us can be trusted with our lives, our futures and our eternity! Life is not just meaningless pain and suffering. It has a purpose and will be fully disclosed to us in the end.

One day, all of our questions will be answered; death will be abolished—"swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54). Revelation 21:4 assures us that God will wipe away every tear from His children's eyes, and there will no longer be any death, mourning, crying or pain. This is the blessed hope—not a fantasy or fairy tale, but an assured coming reality.

Just think, we will see our Creator face to face. All pain, suffering and death forever banished. All our injuries, scars, sickness and disease forever removed. We will be restored to a healthy, youthful and immortal body.

Every defeat, humiliation and embarrassing moment will be forgotten evermore. God will turn our tears and sadness into laughter and joy. He will be our God, and we will be His people (Revelation 21:3).

We will inherit the "fullness of joy" promised by God and the pleasure of living with Him forever—enjoying all He has prepared for those who love Him.

> You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever (Psalm 16:11).

No wonder the heroes of the faith were willing to sacrifice and

suffer anything in this life to inherit all God has promised in the life to come.

Finish Strong

In spite of pain, suffering and adverse circumstances, resolve to live your life in such a way as to glorify the Lord with every aspect of your life. Finish the race strong! End your life faithfully serving Christ and passionately proclaiming the gospel.

The apostle Paul's life had been a sacrificial offering to the Lord (Romans 12:1; Philippians 2:17). Near the end of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy while imprisoned in Rome:

> For I am already being poured out as a drink offering [In the Levitical system, the drink offering was pouring wine out of a vessel onto the altar in the Temple by a Jewish priest (Numbers 15:1-10; 28:4-7). Just as the drink offering concluded the sacrificial ceremony, Paul expected to be executed soon, which would be his final offering in service to the Lord.], and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course [Unlike other letters in which Paul writes of running the race, now he concludes that he has finished the race, serving God unto death.], I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Closing Challenge

Commit your life to Christ and ask for His healing and help in the midst of your pain and suffering—whether it is health related, family or marriage connected, loss of a loved one or some other life-altering challenge. May God in His time and His way, grant you the grace and strength to persevere. May He rejuvenate your body, renew your mind, refresh your spirit, restore your peace and return

your joy.

Listen with your ears and your heart as you read Romans 8:28-39 out loud to yourself. I pray God's Word encourages and strengthens you in the midst of any pain and suffering:

> And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:28-39).

Dr. David Jeremiah accurately stated, "There is good news to be found in the bad when God is involved."

Scripture Search On Persecution and Suffering

You may want to look up all of the scriptures listed below, and keep them as a future resource when you, a friend or loved one need to be reminded of what God's Word says concerning persecution and suffering. These verses and biblical principles, some of which are quoted throughout this booklet, will give you a biblical perspective on persecution and suffering.

Deuteronomy 30:7
2 Chronicles 36:15-16
Job 13:15
Psalm 9:9-10
Psalm 34:18-19
Psalm 46:1-3, 7
Psalm 105:17-21
Psalm 119:67, 71, 157-161
Jeremiah 20:11
Daniel 7:25-26
Amos 5:10
Matthew 5:10-12, 38-45
Matthew 13:20-21
Matthew 23:34-38
Matthew 24:21-22
Mark 8:38
Mark 10:29-30
Mark 13:9
John 15:18-21
John 16:1-4, 33
John 17:14
Acts 7:51-60
Acts 8:1-3
Acts 9:4-5, 10-16
Acts 11:19
Acts 13:50-51
Acts 14:21-22
Romans 5:3-5

Romans 8:16-18, 28-39
Romans 12:12-21
2 Corinthians 4:8-18
2 Corinthians 6:4-10
2 Corinthians 12:8-10
Philippians 1:12-14
Philippians 3:6-11
1 Thessalonians 3:3-4, 7
2 Thessalonians 1:4-5
2 Timothy 3:10-12
Hebrews 10:32-34
Hebrews 11:32-38
Hebrews 12:3
James 1:2-4
James 5:10-11
1 Peter 1:3-9
1 Peter 2:20-23
1 Peter 3:8-17
1 Peter 4:1-2, 12-19
1 Peter 5:6-10
1 John 3:1-3, 10-13
Revelation 1:9
Revelation 2:8-10
Revelation 6:9-11
Revelation 12:17
Revelation 13:7
Revelation 20:4
Revelation 21:1-7

Donna and Don Reed

Special thanks to Donald G. Reed for his contribution toward the printing of this book in memory of his beloved wife, Donna L. Reed, who died December 27, 2005, after a valiant battle with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Don is the founder of Don Reed Ministry in Hermitage, PA.

For More Information

Bill Rudge has produced numerous books, pamphlets and audio messages on a variety of timely topics. For a complete listing or a copy of his informative newsletter, visit www.billrudge.org or write to:

Bill Rudge Ministries P.O. Box 108 Sharon, PA 16146 U.S.A.

www.billrudge.org